

“OPENING THAT TRAIL IN THEIR MIND”: COMMUNICATIVE PRACTICE OF  
TRAILBLAZING

A Dissertation

by

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## ABSTRACT

Trailblazing can be understood as a process of negotiating communicatively constructed realities from the vantage of the social margins or **an** under-represented identity. An understanding of this process from the perspective of those situated in the margins encourages a line of questioning that delves into the communicative struggle about the self in relation to mental schema, past events and expectations for the future. How individuals communicate about themselves and express their identity is rooted in what individuals perceive as possible in light of social norms, expectations and standards. Pierre Bourdieu presents several key concepts, which create an outline of practice that guide our thought processes, how we behave and communicate about identity. A review of these concepts presents a foundation from which we can begin to make sense of the components that shape the trailblazing experience.

Trailblazing research expands our understanding of what it means to be an agent of change. Specific nuances between trailblazers and pioneers are presented and discussed as typologies of agents of change. This project focuses on the specific communicative practices of female baseball players and organizers from across the United States as they negotiate expectations of conformity and aspirations for change. Using the theoretical lens and concepts of Bourdieu provides a unique opportunity for understanding the construction of an identity that is trying to make way through an organization embedded in a field that is dominated by a particular group.

## DEDICATION

### **To Elizabeth**

Your persistent support and encouragement are a testament to the commitment we made. Thank you for reminding me to “Masito up”, and to keep at it. I am the luckiest.

### **To My Boys**

You have each reminded me to stay strong, to be better than I was the day before, and be the best father that I can be. Nunc coepi.

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## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Overview

*Cosgriff Hernandez observation notes from August 3, 2011,*

*Cary, North Carolina,*

*USA Baseball National Training Complex*

*I park my little rental car in the parking lot of the USA Baseball training facility. It is white, so it should not bake in this Carolina heat. There are not many cars in the lot- probably just enough to account for the parents that made the trek and the employees working the facility today. I'm excited as I approach the red clayed arch that denotes the confines of 'USA Baseball.' I am going to watch some good international baseball competition today. I can't remember the last time I got to watch baseball all day. I feel like a kid again. As I walk up to the collection of diamonds, I am struck by the immaculate landscape, brick archway that welcomes me to the set of diamonds, and the feeling that this is the big time. Anticipation and excitement is in the air as I approach the archway- it reminds me of the feeling of going to mass. There is a transition once you pass the gates where you can leave your troubles behind and meditate on all that is good.*

*The Canadian, US and US Baseball flags waive gallantly in the light breeze. The maple leaf looks so sharp and every stitch in the Stars and Stripes is pristine. Not a cloud in the sky, but I can feel the early humidity of the Carolina*

*sun; it is going to get hot today. As I go over the rise and make the long walk down the left-field of the premier diamond I hear the loud clapping sound of a ball hitting leather and the ping of metal as it hits what I know is a baseball. I know these sounds, I grew up with them. These sounds are in my dreams- the good ones. They are so distinct in my mental catalogue and cue emotions and thoughts that run to my core. I pause to watch the players go through their warm-ups. Warm-ups turn into long toss, which then graciously transforms into running drills. They all look so collective- legs and arms moving in unison. The players take the field for infield and I take in the middle infielders as they “turn two” and marvel at the ballet-like footwork of the fielders as they make magic in the middle of the diamond.*

*After several minutes I snap out of it and realize I have to take my seat- but there are plenty to be had. I approach the main diamond, and the players come into focus. It is the women’s national teams from Canada and the US warming up. A passerby who seems determined to find a game to watch after visiting the souvenir store by the main entrance comments, “Are those women? I did not know that softball played here.” I quickly take the opportunity to correct him, saying, “That is the US national baseball team. The women’s team.” The stranger is confused by my quick response, mouth agape. The middle-aged man is processing the moment: ‘Women play baseball?’ The women on this diamond have challenged this stranger’s mental schema of what is possible, maybe even of*

*what is acceptable. I smile, move on and get ready to watch some good ball today.*

The idea of women playing baseball was a different concept to the passerby in this situation. Seeing the women from both teams play baseball created a new space in this person's conceptualization of what was possible. The observations of the passerby are reminiscent of Ozick's (1971) discussion of perceptions on how women think and write in an academic setting. A way of doing, or writing per Ozick (1971), was perceived as being either inherently ovarian or testicular. We have it ingrained in us that particular groups can and cannot achieve physical and/or cognitive plateaus. In my reflections on these comments, what strikes me are the overarching theoretical perceptions of what someone can (cannot), should (should not) and are considered capable (incapable) of doing. Of more significance to me is how individuals from under-represented groups go about changing perceptions of the status quo through communication.

This process of changing the dominant perspective has been referred to as trailblazing. Trailblazing is about doing something new and different; being a force that has the potential to create a space for the re-conceptualization of the status quo. The notion of trailblazing is grounded in a communicative process in relation to a mental schema at a particular point in time, which create parameters of what is, and is not socially possible. Communication about these parameters provide an opportunity to understand how change may emerge by identifying the challenges posed to the status quo and sets of principles that regulate our actions about who we should be.

One means for individuals within organizations to manage tensions is via narratives. Both self-narratives and others' narratives present opportunities for participants to communicate meaning about their experiences and create shared meaning. The narratives that individuals share are reflections of their identity, and illustrate norms of what is and is not culturally acceptable. The people who are in the margins are "sites of struggle at which various values and interests meet and are negotiated" (Wieland, 2010, p. 504). The experiences and stories are representations of where social realities collide and are negotiated. How participants in the margins manage and construct their identity is at the core of this research project. The stories that are told are reflective in nature, socially constructed, and presume that we are each an active agent who has the ability to shape our own identity (Giddens, 1991). Embedded in narratives are sets of social guidelines and parameters that inform how we should behave. Particular attention will be given to the emergence of these guidelines in participants' narratives and how tensions between personal aspirations and social norms are communicatively managed.

## **1.2 Culture, organization and sport**

Trailblazing takes place in an organizational and cultural setting (Sharf, Geist-Martin, Cosgriff-Hernandez, & Moore 2012). With this in mind, there are numerous opportunities to examine the process. One organizational setting that is of particular interest is that of women in baseball. Baseball is our national past-time and is touted as being a reflection of our cultural struggles. Trujillo (1991) argued that baseball is a game that has "influenced our sense of masculinity" through the creation of cultural icons that inform our understanding of what it means to be a man, and a woman (p. 292). The

images and narratives of a prominent player, Nolan Ryan, present commodified characteristics of masculinity. The five characteristics: the embodiment of power, image of a capitalistic worker, family patriarch, white rural cowboy and phallic symbol are intertwined not only with Ryan, but also with the game of baseball (Trujillo, 1991). The basic struggle between a pitcher and a batter presents a unique demonstration of machismo – the same quality that is integrated into our notion of masculinity. Furthermore, Trujillo (1991) argues that baseball, unlike other sports, is woven into our cultural and historical identities as a collective society.

Our understanding of who can play baseball also has been compounded by the corporatization of sport, which “has provided far more opportunities for male participants than for female participants and has placed far more emphasis on marginalizing women as cheerleaders, spectators, and advertising images” (Trujillo, 1991, p. 292). These social expectations create what Trujillo (1991) recognized as a hegemonic structure that controls our understanding and expectations of who *can* and *cannot* play baseball. In this context, women who play baseball are framed as trailblazers; individuals of an underrepresented group that seek to manage the tensions between social expectations of who they should be and what they wish to become.

Similar processes of changing the status quo expectations of individuals take place across all of sport (Lindemann & Cherney, 2008; Kraft & Brummett, 2009; Webster, 2009). Sport serves as a space where we can explore the social and political forces that influence our world. These aspects merge together in the sport of baseball, providing a unique space where we explore questions of the process of trailblazing. The

current state of women's baseball provides contextual understanding of how the sport is organized. Two aspects inform the author's understanding of women's baseball: 1) the literature about women's baseball, and 2) direct experiences and training in coaching women playing baseball. In previous research, the experiences of women in baseball have been primarily examined from a biographical and historical approach (Gregorich, 1993; Berlage, 1994; Ross, 2002; Cohen, 2009; Ring, 2009). Female ballplayers such as Mamie "Peanut" Johnson and Ila Borders capture the experiences of elite level players. Johnson was the first female pitcher in professional baseball and played in the Negro Leagues. After going to New York University, where she studied medicine and engineering, she attempted to try-out for the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL), but was denied the opportunity to play due to her race. "Peanut", who earned her nickname from an opposing batter due to her small stature at just 5feet, 3 inches and 100 lbs., signed with the Indianapolis Clowns in 1953 where she played with two other women — Connie Morgan and Toni Stone. She allegedly learned how to throw her curveball from the famous Satchel Paige. Johnson's manager for the Clowns, Buster Haywood, would schedule her to pitch at least one game in an attempt to boost ticket sales. Over her tenure with the Clowns, Johnson had a 33-8 won-loss record and a batting average of .273.

Ila Borders was the first woman to pitch in professional baseball game in the modern era. Borders was awarded a scholarship to Southern California College where she also became the first woman to throw a complete game at the collegiate level. Borders went on to play at Whittier College in California in 1997. Borders' success as a

left-handed control pitcher (mastering the strike zone) led to her signing with the St. Paul Saints of the Independent Northern League. Although Borders' pitches only ranged between 70-79 miles per hour, she used an assortment of off-speed pitches to keep hitters off balance. Her success was met with resistance however, when one manager of a competing team threatened to forfeit if his team had to face her in the playoffs. The manager did not follow through on his threat when the teams faced off; Borders would leave the playoff game with a 2-0 lead after six shutout innings on the mound. Borders went on to pitch for several minor league teams over her career, and in 1998 became the first woman pitcher to start a men's professional game with the Duluth-Superior Dukes. However, after a couple of stints with different teams Borders was back playing for the Duluth-Superior Dukes, where she pitched for a manager who returned her to the bullpen and used Borders sparingly. After requesting trades, injuries, and frustration with not being looked at by any Major League teams, Borders retired by 2000. These stories document the sometimes contentious, but consistent relationship that women have had with the game as participants at elite levels.

However, the participation of women in baseball traces back to the Victorian age and underscores how the sport served as a mechanism for social change (Berlage, 1994). Berlage, a sports sociologist, argues that baseball contributed to the resistance and reshaping of the Victorian ideals of womanhood where the image of the "frail, Victorian lady" stood in contrast to the image of the "healthy, robust sportswoman" (1994, p. 1). Baseball provided a stage where the image of the authentic woman (Victorian image) would be challenged and transformed. During this time period, middle to upper class

women pushed the limits of physical expression (Delaney & Madigan, 2009). Immigrant and lower-class women during this time period worked primarily in factories, and had little to no opportunity for leisure time to engage in sport. In contrast, women among the upper class participated in “passive sports such as croquet, bowling, tennis, golf and archery” for “social purposes rather than competitive ones” (Delaney & Madigan, 2009, p. 180). As all-female colleges emerged in 1870’s, educators incorporated physical education as part of the curriculum. These classes provided opportunity for women to take part in sport and push social limits of the predominant image of womanhood at the time, while further expanding the divide amongst the social classes. During this time period a greater differentiation between social classes and the sexes occurred, which was reflected through sport.

Historical biographical accounts such as those by Berlage (1994) and Ross (2002), a communication scholar, provide an understanding of how women are framed in the game of baseball. A consistent theme across the narratives of female ballplayers’ biographical accounts emphasizes their uniqueness in the context of the game. However, none of these accounts delve into how the frames of women in baseball are communicatively created, sustained, and/ or reinforced. In baseball, women are often upheld as extremely rare examples, or tokens. Cloud’s (1996) critical analysis of Oprah’s narrative argues that Winfrey’s story is a “tokenistic biography” that “serves to blame the oppressed for their failures and uphold a meritocratic version of the American Dream” (p. 134). As a result, Winfrey’s narrative serves the status quo and actually works against the group(s) that Winfrey represents. Progress, development and change



are stifled and hampered by the narrative that is meant to serve as a gleaming example of hope for change. Prior works on women in baseball, such as those by Berlage (1994) and Ross (2002) have focused on the individualized narratives of women in sports and how they have overcome obstacles to break the norm, while leaving the status quo in place. Little research focuses on the communicative structures in place, how they are created and reinforced. The relationship between the communicative structures and the biases that are formulated to serve the status quo and create an environment where every female player is perceived and potentially treated as a token.

### **1.3 Forces at play**

Ring (2009) is unique in her discussion of women in baseball in that she delves into the social forces at play, which contribute to our understanding of baseball as predominately masculine. She argues that social and political forces in the sport of baseball have created a system which aims to exclude based on social class, race and gender, while also replicating itself to keep these classifications at bay (Ring, 2009). To compound matters, Ring (2009) argues that over time, the game of softball (fast and slow pitch) became the socially acceptable equivalent of baseball for women. As a result, when women today disclose that they play baseball, it is often presumed that they mean that they play softball. The nuances and perspectives of the sport are known to insiders, but not to outsiders. Consider for example, the differences between tennis and table tennis. The skills and abilities that are developed for each of these sports vary considerably, however we are less prone as a society to jump to the conclusion that the sports are the same or that women *should* play one of these sports. The underlying

presumptions and biases associated with baseball and softball illustrate our collective misunderstanding of gender, construction of taboos and boundaries that emerge through expectations. How an individual is introduced to the sport and their knowledge of the game is developed are a means for gaining further insight into understanding the underlying presumptions and biases associated with baseball.

Ross (2002) also is the only publication to date that takes a communicative approach to women in baseball, develops an *a priori* model of how women construct knowledge and uses historical narratives of women in baseball to illustrate five ways of knowing. In the first example Ross (2002) argues that women in baseball know the sport through examples of “silence”, where they have been subjugated “to authority and power” and relied “on others without assertion” (p. 394). In this situation, no dialogue exists and a woman’s ignorance and incompetence is presumed. In contrast, men grow up in an environment where they are welcomed and encouraged to engage in baseball. A woman’s primary means of learning is through observation of one skilled in the art. In this model, women are granted little opportunity to serve in other roles such as mentor, coach, or instructor and are relegated to the role of consummate student.

A second way of knowing is via “received knowledge” which “consists of gifts of knowledge from authorities” (Ross, 2002, p. 394). In this context of learning it is presumed that women do not have an insight into a body of knowledge that is otherwise accessible by men (Ross, 2002). This model of learning adopts a mindset that men play baseball, and that women play ‘other’ sport – especially softball. Within baseball, this approach enables men to claim positions of power and leadership since women are

presumed to know little to nothing about the sport. “Subjective knowledge” is a third example presented by Ross (2002). This form of knowing, “depends on attending to an inner voice to make a transition from passivity to action” (Ross, 2002, p. 394). In this learning environment, there is a presumption that an internal compass, or internal voice’, provides an innate sense of guidance. This is best understood with examples of individuals that just seemed to pick up the sport naturally or were ‘born to play’. Individuals that have an internal voice make connections and see the material as natural. Hence the knowledge and skills in question are picked up and retained somewhat seamlessly by the natural observer. However, status quo rhetoric and framing of issues largely dictate who is born to play. In other words, the dominant group has the ability to set the parameters for those attempting to gain entry, therefore the internal voice is largely a function of what the status quo is willing to allow.

The next example, “procedural knowledge”, is a combination of the previous two ways of knowing, and “requires a mentor” who provides “instruction in methodology” and “consistent urging of one’s inner voice” (Ross, 2002, p. 395). For this type of learning, guidance from a senior member is fundamental to acquiring knowledge. Furthermore, the mentor tends to internal mechanisms that guide the student. The presumption is that the student is not capable of recognizing or fostering the knowledge that is required to succeed. This model, as those reviewed above, clearly place women in a subsidiary position and presumes that women have no way of knowing on their own. The final way of knowing the sport is constructed knowledge as a form of “passionate knowing” in which women “use the self as an instrument of understanding” are “eager to

share their experience so that others can understand their stepping outside of the system” (Ross, 2002, p. 395). This final example is a transformative experience that requires full participation and presumes that all voices are equal in the process of sharing. Ross’ (2002) use of each of these ways of knowing to codify the eras of women’s baseball and linkage to narratives of women in baseball provides insights into the unique aspects that mark the relationship of women to baseball and society. However, the study presumes that this is the way of knowing and does little to support the conclusions from a participant’s perspective.

Over time women have found a way to play through “individual and societal factors [that] have occasionally led to the lifting of the taboo against women playing baseball – and to the subsequent reinstatement of these taboos” (Ross, 2002, p. 397.) The exceptions to the taboo of women playing baseball are fissures in the status quo. Ross (2002) attributes the fissures, or “suspension of taboo” to “anomaly, cultural catastrophe, and advances in social equity” (p. 397). Anomaly is strikingly similar to tokenism, and occurs on an individualized level. In this context the exception, or uniqueness of the participant’s gender takes center stage and their presence is interpreted as a once-off event. The second exception occurs on a larger structural level and necessitates an event as a catalyst. Good examples of these include World War II. In these times, the void of men provided women the opportunity for play through the re-framing of expectations of the genders. During this time period people were thrust into new roles and responsibilities out of necessity. How society framed expectations of men and women at that time was in flux. The All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AAGPBL)

spawned during such an era and was short-lived. The catastrophe of the era allowed for the suspension of taboos temporarily and out of necessity. Finally, movements such as women's rights and those described previously in the Victorian era are examples where the equity of gender came to the forefront. In the process, women gained access and chipped away at the taboos and biases that otherwise kept women from participating. A major takeaway from Ross' discussion is that there are various ways for taboos to be tested and broken. Secondly, the breaking of the taboo suggests there is space to question the status quo and for change to occur with a re-framing of expectations. Interestingly, Ross (2002) notes that once each of these moments or events pass, taboos can and have been reinstated. This approach encourages a method of analysis that accounts for the ebb and flow of the tides of change and potential reinstatement of a taboo that serves the status quo.

What is clear through these analyses is that baseball provides a unique space where scholars may examine the issues that influence society. As we consider these aspects it is critical to note that, "women are disqualified from authentic life if they are banned from baseball" (Ross, 2002, p. 397). Sport is an authentic reflection of our society. Therefore the barriers that women in baseball challenge and overcome provide an opportunity to explore stories of social power struggles, resistance, and social change. Furthermore, it is important to note that each of these studies of women in baseball contribute to our understanding of the history of the game, yet do little in contributing to our knowledge about the experiences of women who currently play today, or the role that communication plays in these experiences.

This study examines the experiences and narratives of women in baseball, providing insights into how the status quo is contested through the identities that are socially constructed in the context of sport. This process of change is examined from the participants' perspective. In this context, communication scholars gain insight into how identities from the social margins are contested and brought into the mainstream. In the process of inquiring about these experiences, we gain a better understanding of how trailblazing is theoretically communicated and constructed, as well as the pragmatic strategic and tactical moves that facilitate change.

#### **1.4 Positioning of the researcher in relation to baseball**

My participation and support of the sport of baseball not only provides me insights and access to many organizations, but also is important to discuss as it influences the questions I ask and how they are asked. In other words, this discussion is an important part of the self-reflective process that informs and influences how research is conducted (La Pastina, 2006). A review of the researcher's positioning in relation to the participants reflects a familiarity with various contextual issues, including:

- Female ballplayers are often mistaken as softball players
- There are nuanced differences of skill sets and strategic approaches between softball and baseball
- Women's baseball leagues typically have no more than four teams, with players most affiliated with one team often playing on other teams to ensure that games can take place

- Tournaments for women's baseball are not scheduled so that players can play in multiple tournaments. Most of the tournaments are on the East Coast and cater to elite-level (highly skilled athletes) club teams
- Coaches and organizers are not well connected regionally. Relationships amongst coaches are often defined and characterized by which players/regions they claim as theirs
- Players' careers at non-elite levels of play are influenced by social pressures to start families, as well as to play slow-pitch softball
- There is a lack of a centralized figure or organization to coordinate, manage and/ or set policies as is the case in contemporary men's amateur leagues,

Reflection upon these issues also provides an opportunity for examination of ethical and methodological concerns that are consciously and unconsciously managed throughout the research project (Stoddart, 1986). In this space, the researcher is provided an opportunity to question and examine the presumptions that could otherwise be overlooked. A brief review of my own journey into women's baseball provided the opportunity to reflect on what knowledge and questions I had accumulated through my experiences.

In the summer of 2004, my younger sister decided that she wanted to play baseball. She asked our father and I to help coach her team. My father, mother, and I gladly and excitedly supported her as she endeavored into a sport where she is mistaken by outsiders as a slow-pitch softball player, heckled, received reprisals on the diamond,

mocked, and socially outcast by friends and extended family. Without recognizing it in the moment, my sister was testing commonly held presumptions about baseball as masculine. Her participation in the sport created a contested space of identity that presented others with an opportunity to question what was and was not acceptable for a female athlete. These personal experiences served as a launching point into larger issues that I began to observe across players' careers, other teams, tournaments and other organizers.

Along the way I took notice of and fostered a particular interest in how the women who play baseball communicatively negotiate situations both on and off the diamond. In the early stages of my experience I was welcomed into the world of women's baseball and served as a coach, organizer, and recruiter. Each of these roles provided unique opportunities to share my knowledge and love of a sport with players who have not been provided the same opportunities as I have as a male. I was fortunate to be able to play baseball in a variety of leagues for the past 20 years from Little League and high school to collegiate and semi-pro organizations. Most women do not have the opportunity to have the level of involvement or benefit from the education that is afforded at higher levels of play. Of all the sports that I have played, I have always felt the most connection to and passion for baseball. When I transitioned to a coach, I connected with these female ballplayers that shared that same love of the game and was moved by the courage displayed in the face of social and communicative challenges that the female athletes and those that support them encountered. The story of how these



women communicatively negotiate social expectations and norms to achieve what they love is inspirational and contributes to our understanding of communication theory.

As an assistant coach on a women's baseball team I participated in national tournaments, organized an international friendly series against an Australian travel squad, and helped to train elite-level talent. What I discovered was that women's baseball in the United States is a loose collection of regional teams that occasionally get together to play at various series or tournaments. Unlike boys and men's baseball, there is no governing body that organizes, creates policy, or recruits players to the sport. Each region is governed by volunteer coaches and organizers who have taken a vested interest in the sport and players in their territory. In this fragile organizational context, players constantly change teams due to disputes about who makes decisions related to the management of the team, and personal relationships. Often, teams die out, creating an opportunity for another organization to emerge with a different mix of the same players.

In the early stages of the United State's National Team (early 2000's), the national squad was selected through various tryouts held across the country. These tryouts are still conducted today in the selection of the national squad. The tryouts are promoted to the coaches and managers of independent club teams and leagues across the country. Coaches and managers can recommend players, who then have the opportunity to attend tryouts where players are selected to the U.S. National Team based on a complex collection of recommendations, talent assessment, and notoriety. In this organizational structure, regional and local teams share the responsibility of recruiting and developing talent that is then taken away to play on the national team. These

regional teams play against other women's teams periodically, however the number and frequency for tournaments fluctuates around the country. Clubs and leagues are challenged to develop and retain regional talent, while also presenting limited opportunities for assessment through head-to-head competition. Difficulties for creating competitive outlets persist in women's baseball due to the small number of teams and because they are scattered across the country. To further complicate matters, one team on the East Coast has developed a reputation as the training squad for the National Team. This team has not lost a tournament title for almost a decade and is strategically positioned as the unofficial gatekeeper for gaining access to the elite-level of women's baseball.

These experiences in baseball granted me access to other women's club teams via my credentials as a coach and organizer. My experiences also provided further insights into the organizational structure of women's baseball and nuances of the game. As someone who plays baseball, and as a coach of women's baseball, I gained firsthand knowledge and experience of the social challenges that women face. As a participant and supporter of a potential trailblazer, my sister, I was introduced to other women who play around the country and the world, local and national organizers, and coaches and other baseball enthusiasts. The people that make up women's baseball are an informal network serving as the organizational structure of modern women's baseball. Upon further reflection, this adds another layer to the study by focusing on the trailblazing narrative as it is also engaged and co-constructed by the researcher. The complexities of the roles and

relationships presented numerous ethical challenges for the study that will be discussed in further detail in the final chapter.

### **1.5 History of women in baseball**

The modern roots of women's baseball can be traced to a Victorian age that marks when sport became more accessible to women. Women who were financially better off began to experiment with various sports in which to spend their leisure time- especially women who attended college. Baseball was one of the sports that proliferated across the nation after the Civil War. Seven elite institutions of women's higher learning directly contributed to development of the relationship of women in baseball (Berlage, 1994). The seven colleges- Smith, Wellesley, Mount Holyoke, Vassar, Radcliffe, Bryn Mawr, and Barnard were referred to as the "Seven Sisters" and founded in the 1860's to 1880's. First, these colleges were at the forefront of educating women for the modern era and took an approach to education that sought to produce an "educated, independent, athletic type" (Berlage, 1994, p. 9). As stated, the national interest in baseball was also growing rapidly during this time period. Baseball fit the bill as an active and social sport for educators and students at the Seven Sisters colleges. Baseball was perceived as a safer alternative in comparison to other sports such as basketball, which by the 1920's became the catalyst for changing women's collegiate and competitive sports in the U.S. In comparison, basketball was perceived as fostering "manly strength" and rendering women too competitive (Berlage, 1994, p. 20). By the 1920's, administrators and educators in women's higher education institutions were discussing how they could minimize the competitive influence that sport had upon women.

Drastic measures were passed in April of 1923 at the Conference on Athletics and Physical Recreation for Women and Girls. Attendees agreed to implement policies that mandated the type of clothing that was allowed during play, requirements for universal participation, dictated the number of days a week that sport could be played and even proposed modified rules governing women's sports that made them less strenuous and competitive. Berlage (1994) argues that the Conference in 1923 marked the end of efforts to make women's baseball an accepted collegiate sport. Subsequently, women's sport took on a more subdued approach in the years to come- a casualty of the movement to make women less manly and less competitive was organized.

The advent of softball as a sport spawned in Chicago, Illinois around 1897, and did not take hold as a woman's sport in the United States until 1926 when Gladys Palmer developed a modified set of rules of the game of baseball with smaller dimensions, primarily the distance of the base-paths. Palmer's rules were adopted in 1927 by the Sub-Committee on Baseball of the National Committee on Women's Athletics of the American Physical Education Association (Berlage, 1994; Ardell, 2005). The set of rules focused on smaller dimensions and "pave[d] the way for softball to be accepted as an alternative form of baseball for women" (Berlage, 1994, p. 96). The prevailing thinking at the time was to make sport less strenuous on women and smaller dimensions of the softball diamond helped to achieve this goal. Furthermore, the thought was that a smaller diamond was more in line with the physical strength that women possessed.

Strategic maneuvers by Major League Baseball further excluded women from baseball. At the turn of the century, various professional teams around the country featured female players in an attempt to increase ticket sales and as exhibitions that highlighted the novelty of women in baseball (Voigt, 1978). During the 1950's Ford Frick, then commissioner of baseball, banned women from baseball in an attempt to prevent teams from using women as promotional stunts. The policy has yet to be revoked or officially overturned, even though there are several examples of women coaching, playing and officiating at the Minor League levels. However, the understanding is clear that women are not welcomed at the highest level of competition in the game as no women have played, coached or officiated baseball in the Major Leagues in the modern era of the game.

Another important aspect that has shaped the relationship of women in baseball is Title IX. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, was introduced by Senator Birch Bayh of Indiana and signed into law by President Nixon on June 23, 1972. The statute states that "no person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance" (Title IX, 1972). A policy interpretation was issued in 1979 by the Office of Civil Rights on the statute that described the assessment of institutional compliance with Title IX based on the following three-prong test:

*[Prong 1] Intercollegiate level participation opportunities for male and female students [must be] provided in numbers substantially proportionate to their respective enrollments;*

*OR*

*[Prong 2] Where the members of one sex have been and are underrepresented among intercollegiate athletes, ... the institution [must] show a history and continuing practice of program expansion, which is demonstrably responsive to the developing interest and abilities of the members of that sex;*

*OR*

*[Prong 3] Where the members of one sex are underrepresented among intercollegiate athletes, and the institution cannot show a continuing practice of program expansion such as that cited above ...it [must] be demonstrated that the interests and abilities of the members of that sex have been fully accommodated by the present program.*

In effect, the statute requires that the number of total roster spots for men and women be proportionate to interests in sports in relation to student enrollment, not that each team allow both genders to play a particular sport. This has perpetuated the perception that softball is the equivalent to baseball. In practice, Title IX has allowed the number of male roster spots on the collegiate baseball team to be balanced by female roster spots on the softball team. Under the Title IX policy women's sport is dependent upon enrollment and interest that the constituency expresses. Therefore, since most women play softball, they are encouraged to play softball, not baseball. The

implementation of this policy reinforces the perspective that men play baseball and that women play softball, which is presumed to offer proportionate athletic opportunities.

Title IX has been significant in shaping our understanding of sport and the role of women in baseball (Berlage, 1994; Ring 2009; Ring 2009). The implementation of this policy led the courts to create a three part test where: 1) athletic participation opportunities that are substantially proportionate to the student enrollment, are provided or 2) a demonstration of continual expansion of athletic opportunities for the underrepresented sex, or 3) full and effective accommodation of the interest and ability of underrepresented sex is provided. Although this policy protected the opportunity for women and men to partake in activities where they were previously underrepresented, this policy also allowed high schools, colleges and universities to reach compliance by pairing activities that may be equally substituted- for example softball and baseball. As a result, schools pair softball as the equivalent to baseball and have reinforced social stigmas of women in baseball through organizational policies that meet legal requirements. Female ballplayers are challenged to play baseball once they reach the high school level. Some women find a way to play during this time period and throughout their college-aged years. Closer examination of the structure of women's baseball reveals a disjointed system, which is not fluid and presents significant challenges for female ballplayers who aspire to play at the highest level.

Currently there is no formal system in place that helps a player progress through to the highest level of play — USA Baseball. Once in high school, most young women play softball. If these women are talented enough, they continue to play softball at the

collegiate level. Much of the lure of playing softball is driven by the economic incentive of landing a collegiate scholarship. At this time the only organizations geared towards providing a showcase opportunity for young women are 'Baseball for All' (BFA), 'The Dream Team', and the Chicago Pioneer. BFA is founded and managed by Justine Siegal, who in the spring of 2011 gained recognition as becoming the first woman to throw batting practice to Major League Baseball teams during Spring Training. 'The Dream Team' is an organization that provides opportunities to young teenage girls to play together as a team in tournament settings across the country against all boys' select teams. Finally, the Chicago Pioneer operates several teams spanning a wide range of ages, which play against boys' teams. Former Chicago Pioneers over the age of eighteen have attempted to stay together and play against other women at select tournaments while also attempting to provide an opportunity for younger Pioneers to continue playing. This organization has attempted to showcase female talent across the country at various age levels. Opportunities for women in the game of baseball at this time are limited. These organizations, as well as several women's leagues and independent teams across the country, are organized and operated by no more than thirty volunteers spread across the United States. The majority of women playing today are of Caucasian decent and have the resources (time and finances) for leisure and/or higher-level competitive baseball experiences. Leagues charge players fees to cover field rental, insurance, umpire fees and other administrative costs. Fees for club team experiences are higher and serve as a barrier of entry for those players that cannot afford the fees, nor the time to travel to play at the tournaments that club teams go to. Nonetheless, the support that



these organizers and women receive is socially constructed through communication and constrained by organizational structures in place.

A fundamental gender bias underlines thinking about women and the game of baseball. To date there is no knowledge or explanation as to why young women choose baseball. Instead, studies such as Fallows (1996) explore the meaning and significance of communication that are used to pejoratively describe a player who cannot play the game. One way that a player in the game of baseball is demeaned is by comparing their throwing motion to that of a girl, especially at a younger age when players are learning the fundamentals of the game. This establishes a barrier for women in their attempt to gain entry into the game. The phrase, ‘throws like a girl’, is an example of such communication that is used to describe someone who lacks the proper physical mechanics that are needed to throw a baseball for distance and speed. Employing such phrasing also carries with it a suggestion that someone is genetically incapable of performing the task. Regardless of either interpretation, Fallows points out that the phrase has the “implication that to do something ‘like a girl’ is to do it the wrong way” (1996, para. 3). This perspective has dominated the sport of baseball. The blatant sexism of this statement reflects a predominant line of thinking that has limited the entry of women into sport while reinforcing gender roles in our culture and shaping how women construct their identities (Fallows, 1996; Mennesson, 2000). However, the people who are actively engaged in women’s baseball are in the process of changing these social norms. With this in mind, questions of how this happens and what that experience is like begin to surface and serve as the foundation for this research.

The following chapter explores some of the theoretical components that underscore the communicative aspects at play. The review of literature culminates in a series of research questions, which provide a basis of inquiry.

## CHAPTER II REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 2.1 Theoretical lens

Our academic training influences the questions we ask, how we ask them, and how we interpret the data that we gather. As an interpretive scholar my axiological position is that multiple perspectives exist and may be shared (Allen-Collinson, 2009). It is “through our presence, and by listening and questioning in particular ways, [that] we critically shape the stories participants choose to tell” (Riessman, 2008, p. 50). Our understanding of how we construct knowledge of reality(s) is influenced by our presence as researchers.

Epistemological and ontological meta-theoretical orientation(s) influence how we perceive and approach communication research. These orientations also influence *how* we conduct communication research. One such approach that may be taken is a social constructionist approach (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Lannamann, 1995; Hruby, 2001). This approach posits that we construct our reality through a complex social process whereby each of us constructs conceptions of one another. These conceptions become the basis for how we organize, and *how* and *what* we communicate. Furthermore, a social constructionist approach takes the position that product is just as important as the process, and that each influences the other (Lannamann, 1995; Allen, 2005). In the process, our knowledge and conceptions of reality become embedded in society permeating how we organize to become institutionalized ways of thinking. The sum of what we know as a society is the “total of ‘what everybody knows’ about a social world,

an assemblage of maxims, morals, proverbial nuggets of wisdom, values and beliefs, myths, and so forth” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 65). Adopting this orientation positions this research as a social constructionist with an appreciation for how and what is produced.

A major presumption that social constructionists embrace is that both the process and product by which reality is constructed are equally subject to critical examination. Social constructionists presume that our realities arise from complex social systems of relationships, histories, ideologies, context, and social factors that are in constant flux and contest (Allen, 2005). As a researcher I do not contest whether a reality exists, rather I embrace and presume the notion that participants are capable of sharing their realities with me through conversational inquiry.

Secondly, it should be recognized that these complex social systems not only generate realities but are also used to construct identity through the products we construct. Individuals create “labels, classifications, denotations, and connotations of social identity” to make sense of themselves and their surroundings (Allen, 2005, p. 37). These social constructions may be implemented and influenced by others in similar fashion, and compound our communicative environs. Adopting a social constructionist orientation allows us to examine how identity is constructed from the individual’s vantage as well as others, in various organizational contexts.

Finally, it is important to be aware that the process for communicatively constructing realities and products that researchers and participants create may themselves be in contest with one another. It is therefore critical that the researcher not

allow one reality to trump another. When this lens is adopted to conduct research, careful attention is given to understanding, reporting, and analyzing the perspectives of the participants in their own words.

## **2.2 Social constructionism and identity**

Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) strove to develop a 'reflexive sociology', which took a step back from the process of observation and acknowledged that the observer was not a neutral presence but a social actor in his or her own right. From this perspective, people and groups are part of the process and construction of reality that generate meaning that we seek to understand. This theoretical approach has also been referred to as social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Allen, 2005). Berger and Luckmann's (1966) treatise sets forth the principles which lay a foundation for an orientation that posits that "the formation of the self...must also be understood in relation to both the ongoing organismic development and the social process in which the natural and the human environment are mediated through the significant others" (p. 47-48). From this perspective, people are part of the process for creating the perceptions of reality and institutionalization of thought processes that become accepted as the norm. Of significance is that these approaches create space for questioning not only the status quo, but also the process that creates it.

Galanes and Leeds-Hurwitz (2009) review of social construction presents several principles that inform this study while also complementing Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice. The first principle to consider is that "communication is constitutive; communication makes things" (Galanes & Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009, p. 6). Bourdieu's

notions of cultural capital complement this principle and emphasize how communication can create or establish an identity. Cultural capital is the collection of ways in which people use cultural knowledge to secure their place in society. In other words, individuals use words and the meaning behind them to enforce/reinforce their status in society. But how does this happen? Understanding how meaning is created and the product of that meaning is fundamental to social constructionism. A social constructionism approach shifts from communicative models that focus more on the message or product and emphasize the role of the process. A social constructionist approach is also focused on the relationships between the communicative activity (process) and construction of knowledge (product). The terms and labels we construct as a society may be examined with this in mind. In other words, a label that we use to describe a particular group is both part of a process and a product used to convey meaning. Trailblazing then may be understood in this duality of “processes and products of communicative action” (Galanes & Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009, p. 6). Taking this approach presumes that knowledge is a product of the communicative process of research that can be transformed through communication, and is a product of social interaction.

Another principle set forth by Galanes and Leeds-Hurwitz (2009) is the implication that “a complex, nuanced, and negotiated view of the world is the most valid when undertaking the task of understanding relationships, communities, and social realities” (p. 6). From this vantage, it is understood that multiple perspectives and realities may exist. Adopting this vantage encourages an embracing of a multiplicity of realities that influence our understanding of how we perceive the nature of knowledge

and how it is constructed. With this principle in mind “knowledge is emergent and dialogic, not fixed and monologic” (Galanes & Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009, p. 7). A dominant perspective in the field of communication set forth by Foucault (1997) examines the relationships between knowledge and how structures (realities) are created and reinforced. This approach introduced the notion of hegemony into the field of communication, yet has become “synonymous with domination”, overshadowing the role that agency serves in breaking though structures (Aune, 2000, p. 1). Bourdieu’s work expands upon a Foucauldian focus that emphasizes hegemony, dominating structures, and resistance. Both examine how an individual interacts and operates within a particular structure. Bourdieu and Foucault take a post-structuralist position, which posits that the individual is influenced and shaped by the structure(s) that the individual operates within. One difference between the two theorists is that Foucault places a larger emphasis on how history shapes the individual and influences the individual’s thinking. Bourdieu on the other hand, argues that history is subject to interpretation. Instead of privileging history, Bourdieu examines how a way of thinking is created within a particular context, giving particular attention to how meaning is negotiated and the motivation that contributes to the production and reproduction of structure. The conceptual framework that Bourdieu develops, specifically that of *doxa*, *field* and *habitus* provide useful tools for a conceptual exploration of how realities are socially created through communication and how agents may change or alter structure.

### **2.3 Bourdieu's conceptual framework**

Bourdieu's conceptual framework of a theory of practice provides a theoretical framework to guide an inquiry into trailblazing and how meanings are related to this concept is negotiated. Bourdieu's (1977, 1992) work on the language of practice presents a set of key principles that serve two primary purposes. First, these principles outline the key concepts that position trailblazing as a unique state where the objective and subjective is negotiated. In the process of this discussion, a second purpose is met – a shared language amongst communication scholars. Having a shared language about the theory of trailblazing provides a set of essential tools that can be used to examine, analyze, understand and build communicative theory.

At a colloquial level, trailblazing is a narrative of possibility – it is a story about how potential change comes to be. From a theoretical perspective, trailblazing is an identity with narrative underpinnings. The narrative of trailblazing is constructed within a larger narrative that occurs in a particular context, and emerges through interaction with others (Gergen & Gergen, 1983). Gergen and Gergen's (1983) typology of narratives present useful concepts for explaining the role that narrative plays in the construction of identities. In theory, a trailblazing identity is a directional narrative where persons “structure the events in such a way that they move over time in an orderly way toward a given end” (Gergen & Gergen, 1983, p. 257). For trailblazers, that end is reaching a level of achievement in a context that has historically not accepted persons from their classification(s) and/or group. From this perspective, and at the highest level,



trailblazing qualifies as what Gergen and Gergen (1983) coin as a progressive narrative where there is an upward direction and movement over time.

Bourdieu's (1977) reflexive approach to sociology provides further insight into how the trailblazing narrative is constructed by delving into the epistemological and ontological components that influence and shape our world and the construction of the trailblazing narrative. The process of understanding begins with what Bourdieu (1977) referred to as *doxa*, which is a collection of "systems of classification, which reproduce, in their own specific logic, the objective classes, i.e. the divisions by sex, age or position in the relations of production." (p. 164). These systems of classifications work as mental schemes that begin to shape our thoughts and perceptions of reality. Bourdieu (1977) explains that *doxa* is an experience between "the objective order and the subjective principles of organization" that render a reality of "the natural and social world [such that it] appears as self-evident" (p. 164). For most of society, these mental schemes go unnoticed since they often go untested. For the researcher, uncovering *doxa* is an attempt to understand the unmentioned, which governs our perception of reality and what is possible.

It is not enough for these systems or schemas to exist; men and women must operationalize them. In other words, the systems Bourdieu examines are socially constructed and in turn influence our reality through the available choices we can make. For Bourdieu, *doxa* plays out through the "key concepts of *habitus* and *field* [which] designate bundles of relationships" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 16). Understanding how these two concepts interact with one another to create *doxa* is vital to understanding

how reality is constructed. *Habitus* is a structuring mechanism that is rooted in individuals and is composed of “mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation and action” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 16). Bourdieu states that *habitus* is “history turned into nature” or more simply understood as “yesterday’s man who inevitably predominates in us, since the present amounts to little compared with the long past in the course of which we were formed” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78 & 79). The notion of *habitus* makes us recognize how perceptions of the past contribute to constructions of reality today. It is important to recognize that the individual is never free from history. Instead individuals are both subject to, and makers of history. Thus, in the moment individuals assess what *was*, as they create what *is*. In this space, however small or large it may be, lies an opportunity for change.

*Field* is another vital component of Bourdieu’s *Theory of Practice* and “consists of a set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power (or capital)” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 16). These historical relations are conceived by the individual as being objective and are separate from an individual. In other words, the individual perceives the collection of prior events as a truth that is bounded by time, place, and actors. However, the historical relations serve as a site of conflict where agency is exercised, and objectivity and truth are disputed. The *field* serves the dual purposes of providing structure, while also being subject to transformation. Any *field* “presents itself as a structure of possibilities – of rewards, gains, profits, or sanctions – but always implies a measure of indeterminacy...Even in the universe par excellence of rules and regulations, playing with the rule is part and

parcel of the rule of the game” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 18). These structures are best understood as a series of rules that lead to particular outcomes that lend themselves to a type of *symbolic capital* which may be converted into other forms of capital that reinforce existing power dynamics (Bourdieu, 1977).

The theoretical concepts *doxa*, *habitus* and *field* provide a foundation for understanding how identity is communicatively constructed. *Doxa* delves into the conceptual framework(s) that guide our thinking. This may be understood by delving into what is unmentioned, shared as general knowledge, or even perceived as taboo. The conceptual framework is grounded by a history of relation, or *habitus*, that is understood as objective and/or truth. Communication scholars are uniquely positioned to engage participants in discussion about what is perceived as objective truth and how that shapes their reality. Finally, *field* may be understood as the structure that facilitates the current system. Deeper understanding and description of the system from a participant’s perspective provides an insider view of what is possible and facilitates (reinforces) what we see today.

## **2.4 Application of theoretical framework to current study**

Throughout his work, Bourdieu sought to understand the relationships between the experiences of individuals and the social structures in which they operate and exist. Bourdieu’s approach is rooted in an anthropological tradition as he delves into understanding how individuals create, sustain, and reinforce social structures and the role that agency played in the process (Grenfell, 2008). The conceptual framework of practice as discussed by Bourdieu (1977) is an opportunity to examine how structure and

agency are deciphered and reconciled. This study examines the experience of women in baseball in light of the key concepts from Bourdieu's theoretical examination of social structures, specifically in relation to *doxa*, *habitus* and *field*.

*Doxa* is a phenomenological experience, a "quasi-perfect correspondence between the objective order and the subjective principles of an organization" such that the "natural and social world appears as self evident" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 164). For Bourdieu, the status quo is served by *doxa* and is more often part of that which remains unspoken since "what is essential goes without saying because it comes without saying" (1977, p. 167). Social structures are supported and reinforced in the silence. An unwavering *doxa*, which appears on the surface as a stable social structure is served by objective structures that are more fully reproduced and embraced by individuals (Bourdieu, 1977). This poses a challenge for researchers seeking to understand structures that they are not otherwise familiar with and engage participants in a dialogue about the social structures in which agents reside. Key to overcoming this potential silence about that which appears as self-evident is to inquire about opinion(s) and attitudes that reflect the underlying *doxa*, which in turn help to define it.

Unlike other social theorists, Bourdieu does not see the norm as static over time (Aune, 2000). Bourdieu (1977) argues that in order for social schemes to change, we must first "recognize the legitimacy of the dominant classification in the very fact that their only chance of neutralizing those of its effects most contrary to their own interests lies in submitting to them in order to make use of them" (pp. 164-165). In other words, for the status quo to change, it must be first recognized and identified. Once the status

quo, which is socially constructed, is recognized and identified, efforts to create change may be crafted and steps toward altering the norm enacted. From this perspective, individuals have the ability to change or reinforce the structure through their agency.

Bourdieu argues that those parties that are in “social categories disadvantaged by the symbolic order, such as women and the young” must then submit to the very categories that keep and reinforce order and then use those categories to create change (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 164). From this perspective, agents are posed with significant challenges as they communicatively grapple with the same social categories that may in fact be at the root of their subjectification that contributes to the status quo. This has then the potential to create what Bourdieu refers to as a symbolic domination whereby the under-represented become subjects to the classification that recognizes their unique status (Bourdieu, 1977). For Bourdieu (1977), domination is “only exerted through the communication in which it is disguised” (p. 237). This underscores the role of communication and underscores how categorization has the ability to bind and subjugate, as opposed to creating space for change.

Various studies have explored the role of *habitus* in relation to sport and the social and theoretical implications of how an individual exercises agency while also being a product of history (Wacquant, 2004; Atencio, Beal & Wilson, 2009; Brown, 2009; McGannon & Spence, 2010). Of special note is the work of Atencio, Beal and Wilson (2009), which examines how Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* plays a role in the construction of gender hierarchies in the sport of skateboarding. The authors use Bourdieu’s work on *habitus*, social fields and symbolic capital to analyze the

organization and conceptualization of skateboarding. In the process, they argue that skateboarding practices are used “to gain legitimacy, power and authority” while also allowing them to “more powerfully illustrate how skateboarders engaged in gendered practices relative to social fields associated with street skateboarding (e.g. D.I.Y. culture, lifestyle/action sports and masculine youth culture)” (Atencio, Beal, & Wilson, 2009, p. 9). Through interviews and a review of skateboarding print materials, the authors found that the individual served as the site of contest between competing discourses for their own gender identity, as well as other’s- namely women. Women in the game of baseball also operate in a historical framework that is overwhelmingly masculine. Of interest for this study is how women who play baseball, and organizers who support them, navigate a process that is changing our understanding of the structure and reality of the sport.

The organization of baseball as a sport operates with a particular set of documented and unspoken rules. However, the *field* of baseball is more than a set of rules that govern the playing of the game, creating an institutional perspective that is engrained in our collective minds. There are clear rules of who may, and may not participate, when, and in what spaces. However, the *field* of baseball has evolved over time. Institutional theorists have employed a dialectic view to better understand how over time, an individual may exercise agency with the potential of creating change in an environment where the participants are also a product of the very institution they are changing (Benson, 1977; Seo & Creed, 2002; Bannerman & Haggart, 2015). The rules of the game, with regard to who can and cannot play, reflect the collective institutional thinking of the participants in baseball. As more women appear on the diamond and are

accepted as ballplayers, it creates a paradox that presents individuals the opportunity to exercise agency, which may resist the normative institutionalized view of women in baseball or serve the norm through reinforcement of the status quo. Women who are playing baseball for USA Baseball challenge rules and existing social structure that baseball is to be strictly played by men, while softball is ascribed to women. The experiences of women in baseball are an opportunity to examine shifting dynamics, and the role of communication in a context where agency may be exercised and result in a shift of the ascribed norm.

This principle is critical to understanding how trailblazing occurs since it requires the acceptance and negotiation of multiple perspectives and realities in relation to how we construct, manage, and reinforce identities in organizational contexts. Placed in context, the women who play baseball challenge the status quo and social capital that has been created. Through communicative acts, a reality is tested and new one is created. In the process a new social capital theoretically emerges.

A unique examination by Mennesson of female boxers (2000) identifies a tension in the identity formation of female boxers that is a result of the social histories they challenge. In the process of forming the identity of a female boxer, a new identity is forged. Female boxers, as well as other female athletes, generate new identities that must manage norms established by the status quo of what it means to be a woman and an athlete (Mennesson, 2000). Females who play sports are more often perceived as female-athletes, not as athletes who are female. A similar construction of athletes applies to baseball, wherein women playing baseball are more likely to be understood as women

playing baseball or female ballplayers. The referent of gender becomes inextricably associated with these athletes. Employing a social constructionist approach will aid in the understanding of the process and product that is known as women's baseball.

## **2.5 Research questions**

Multiple histories and perspectives about the expectations of what it means to be an athlete who is also female collide in a moment. These expectations and collisions may be examined through communication. Speaking with these individuals through focused inquiry is an opportunity to capture their re-constructed experiences, and analyze how identity is negotiated and constructed in light of theoretical principles set forth by Bourdieu. In the process we gain insight and understanding of how individuals negotiate identities that are part of the social margins. Inquiry into these issues will aim to create a reflective space for participants to consider how mental schemas (*doxa*) relate (*habitus*) to one another in a particular organizational context (*field*). The following research question has been developed in light of this and how trailblazing is socially constructed as both product and a process:

RQ (1): What are the *doxa* (conceptual frameworks) that contribute to a story (product) of trailblazing?

Bourdieu (1977) recognized that “the self-evidence of the world is reduplicated by the instituted discourses about the world in which the whole group's adherence to that self-evidence is affirmed” (p. 167). From Bourdieu's perspective it is through the contests(s) of discourse that our world is constructed. Those with more power and capital supported by historically-accepted narratives contest with individual perceptions



of history that inform, construct and guide agency and action. Bourdieu (1977) recognized that each individual is understood as an agent who “wittingly or unwittingly, willy nilly, is a producer and reproducer of objective meaning” (p. 79). This distinction of the individual is fundamental to understanding Bourdieu’s perspective on the relationship between structure and agency. Furthermore, we begin to see glimpses of the social construction of reality and the role that individuals play in producing and reproducing meaning when contradictions are posed that challenge the *doxa* of the institution. In this context, individuals are presented with an opportunity to exercise agency that has the potential to resist the norm and create space for change. How individuals communicate about these contradictions should reflect contested histories and perspectives, while also demonstrating how *doxa* is reinforced or a new *doxa* is created.

From this perspective, trailblazing narratives that challenge the status quo will not veer too far from what is deemed as socially acceptable. These experiences, in Bourdieu’s (1977) perspective, reassure “unanimity of a socially approved and collectively attested sense” that imposes itself as an “authority and necessity of a collective position adopted on data intrinsically amenable to many other structurations” (p. 167). The story of trailblazing is a collective narrative that is imposed upon under represented individuals who society deems as having achieved exceptional recognition for their efforts. The trailblazing narrative is in consistent tension between what is acceptable at the time, while also striving to create a reality of what could be. The

following research question takes these aforementioned components into consideration and asks:

RQ (2) Do structures/schemes communicatively influence trailblazers operating within organizations, and if so, how?

As stated earlier, trailblazing may be conceptualized as a force of change within an organization that is dependent upon a communicative process in light of mental schema that serve as parameters of what is, and is not socially possible. Trailblazing is the management of tensions and inconsistencies through communication which generates new meaning(s) that are not currently perceived as socially acceptable, or deemed as conventional ways of organizing. However this process may serve different intents and may not occur as conscious strategy. This leads to the prospect that there may be multiple forms of trailblazing. Some possible typologies include the conscious tactician, reflective transformer, and opportunistic profiteer, to name a few.

Jack Roosevelt ‘Jackie’ Robinson, the first player to break the second color barrier in baseball in 1945 when he was signed by Branch Rickey and later called up to the Major League in April of 1947. Robinson was hand selected by Rickey, then President and General Manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers. As the story goes, Rickey tested Robinson from the onset, pecking Robinson with racial epithets during their initial interview to assess Robinson’s ability to control his emotions (Breslin, 2011). There was some concern about Robinson, as he had faced a court-martial during his military career while stationed in Texas for refusing to move to the back of the bus when ordered to do so. Rickey’s motives in bringing Robinson on were not altogether altruistic for the civil

rights movement as he realized that adding Robinson to the roster achieved two ends from a management perspective (Dreier, 2013). First, the Dodgers organization was looking for ways to become more competitive on the field. A growing number of Major League Baseball scouts, coaches and managers by this point in time recognized that by segregating African-Americans from baseball that a pool of talent was untapped. Second, adding a player like Robinson provided a potential economic boost by trying to reach out to the increasing market of African-Americans, which began moving into urban areas during post-World War II America. These issues aside, Rickey recognized Robinson as the right person for the Dodgers to blaze the trail of integration in professional baseball. As a conscious tactician, Robinson tactfully navigated the tensions and prejudices he faced so that he contributed to his success, while also laying a foundation for other players of color to gain access to the game and other baseball teams.

Robinson's situation differs considerably from that of women in baseball. First, and most notably, women do not have a developed structure of baseball devoted toward women. Second, there is little, if any, economic incentive for establishing a women's baseball league or team, nor evidence that a woman playing at an elite level would increase a club's market share. If women are to break into the current structure baseball, it must be done in an environment where they are encouraged to play baseball rather than softball. The sport and structure of softball is not designed to develop women to play baseball. The differences in the strategy, coaching and organizational structures of softball are a separate entity in their own right. Thus, women remain an anomaly in baseball and are not recognized as ballplayers.

Another type of trailblazer is the reflective transformer. In this case, individuals do not see themselves as trailblazers. Not until a line of questioning is posed or space for reflection is created does the transformation take place. Finally, the opportunistic profiteer may be understood as an individual who is seeking to gain capital (social or monetary) from their actions, which are understood as being different or against the norm. In this case, part of the trailblazer's intent may be to create change, but the primary focus is on gaining capital from being different. John Arthur "Jack" Johnson (1878-1946), the first African-American heavyweight boxer to become champion of the world, serves as an example of the opportunistic profiteer. The "Galveston Giant", as he was called, earned significant notoriety in terms of social and monetary capital for himself in and out of the ring during a period of extreme racism. He fought in an era dominated by racism that was open and part of the establishment. His actions in and out of the ring tested the status quo, social norms, and taboos. However, when asked by fellow African-Americans for a shot at the very title that he had fought so hard to earn, he denied them the opportunity, instead opting to only take on "The Great White Hopes."

These typologies are not exhaustive or exclusive; rather they present a theory of possible themes, which may emerge in the narratives that are shared. Each typology of trailblazing may vary based on the degrees of intent, consciousness, and social awareness. The most important aspect related to RQ3 will be to allow for various typologies of trailblazing to emerge. Although agency plays a role in managing field and pre-existing mental schemes and structures, organizational trailblazers may not see

themselves as really doing anything differently. Care must be given not to presume that participants see themselves as agents of organizational or societal change. In other words, individuals within organizations may simply perceive themselves as part of a long chain of events or individuals, which have made their status possible or even feasible. Still others may not see themselves as taking part in any form of change whatsoever. Inquiry related to RQ3 keeps in mind these operational typologies, while also incorporating a grounded approach in analysis that allows for the participants to construct new and different categories of trailblazing.

RQ (3): Do participants who are marginalized in the *field* (current structure) of baseball see themselves as trailblazers in the construction of their own narrative(s)?

These research questions served as the foundation for the line of inquiry that was developed for interviews, focus groups, observations, and analysis of organizational records of women playing baseball. This data was analyzed from an interpretive approach employing a narrative method that allowed for multiple perspectives and realities to emerge. The following chapter delves into more detail about the methodology employed in this project. More discussion will be given to the process of coding and data management as well.

## CHAPTER III RESEARCH METHOD

### **3.1 Narrative approach**

The theoretical framework of Bourdieu (1977) presented in the previous chapter provide a set of tools for making sense of realities that are communicated by participants in this study. Participants' realities can be understood through the stories that are told (Ewick & Silby, 2003). The stories we tell are socially constructed and guide perspectives when we think about what is socially acceptable in relation to what we would like to personally achieve. Stories are a vital component of the manifestation of objective and subjective realities, but also serve as tools to manage and sustain these realities. The research questions that emerged from the literature in Chapter II seek to understand how and what participants communicate about their experiences as trailblazers. A review of identity construction literature in sport from the communicative perspective revealed that there has been little, if any, research analyzing participant perspectives and perceptions leading to an interpretation of their experiences to formulate a meta-narrative.

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the lens of the researcher. An appreciation for this lens will aid in understanding how the research questions are designed and research is conducted. After this brief discussion, the method to collect data is presented, including a review of the interview and focus groups protocol. Following that discussion there is review of the phases of the coding process, which is

critical to the analysis of data and discussion sections. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the limitations of this study.

We make sense of the world and connect with others through the stories we tell. Stories may be used as tools to socialize, reinforce, and persuade an audience in our personal lives as well as on an institutional level (Becker & Quastoff, 2005). The stories we tell are influenced by history and context and are reflections of our experiences and insights into how individuals comprehend their life (Gergen & Gergen, 1983). The narratives of the participants served as “institutional memories” that “provide the audience with a way of entering into the institutional framework” (Cook-Gumperz, 2004, p. 244). Narration can be understood then as “a specific kind of function-bound verbal interaction, governed by contextualizing devices, genre-specific sequential regularities and corresponding verbal features” (Becker & Quasthoff, 2005, p. 1). People tell stories to give context and deeper meaning to the underlying principles, values, perspectives, and/or emotions that they seek to communicate. This study employs a narrative method that is rooted in interpretive principles to understand the story of trailblazing and how participants may use those stories.

Participants’ stories were collected via interviews, focus groups and the review of organizational policy that define women’s baseball at the national level (Browning, 1992). Triangulating between these sources of data served two purposes: 1) it allowed for independent as well collective voices to emerge, and 2) provided a variety of perspectives from various vantage points within the organization. A narrative method with an emphasis on structural analysis was used in analyzing the data collected. This

method aided in identifying “patterns across a group of biographical narratives” (Riessman, 2008, p. 78). Taking a narrative approach helped to identify various themes, which served as the building blocks to understanding the story of trailblazing. Themes related to narrative elements of storytelling, including: perspectives on history, cultural elements of baseball, important characters, scenes, significant time periods, moments of tension or conflict, and important decisions. Each of these narrative elements served as a foundation for identifying particular themes. Designing the interview and focus group protocol with narrative elements in mind created a space for participants to provide narratives as responses. In the analysis of the data, patterns emerged as they relate to the narrative elements. For example, as participants spoke about key persons that contributed to their success and those that tried to limit their growth as a ballplayer. Discussions about these persons grew out of a line of questioning that encouraged the participants to talk about important characters in their lives. Hence, the themes that emerged flowed from the elements of a narrative, which were identified as potentially crucial to the telling of the story of women’s baseball.

Furthermore, the telling of stories, especially in a focus group setting, provided participants the opportunity to engage one another in dialogue about underlying issues that women face in baseball. In the focus groups, a story would emerge from one participant in response to one of the questions or focused on an underlying issue related to the question. As the story unfolded, other participants would engage the storyteller to create shared meaning. Thus, by the conclusion of the story, the group had jointly created meaning from the initial story. This process was facilitated in large part from the



perspective that most, if not all, players presume that they were the only one to have experienced baseball as a female in their respective geographic location. Hence, as a story would unfold, participants often found particular aspects that spurred their interest and served as a common ground. The research and analysis of the data collected provided the opportunity to examine relationships among the themes and to understand the story as a whole, as opposed to isolated themes.

### **3.2 Description of participants**

Each of the ballplayers in the focus groups was on the roster for the United States Women's Baseball squad for the summer of 2011. The players had come to Cary, North Carolina to train and play against the Canadian National squad at the United States of America Baseball Training Complex. The complex is run by USA baseball and funded through efforts of Major League Baseball. The complex houses eight baseball diamonds and is used for youth camps, development of players on USA Baseball squads from the age of 12 and over.

All members of the US Women's National Team, and any players that were trying out attempting to make the squad were invited to focus groups. Players' ages for the women's squad ranged from seventeen to thirty-four years of age. The players hailed from across the continental United States and were divided into two squads, Red and Blue. Of the thirty-five players, twenty-nine chose to participate in one of the six scheduled focus groups. The high response rate was due in large part to the assistance of Ashley Bratcher, General Manager of the team, who incorporated time for voluntary participation in focus groups as part of the players' daily schedule. Ms. Bratcher

arranged for a room and specified time for each of the six focus groups and was not present prior, during or after the focus groups to ensure players' participation was anonymous and confidential. Attendance at the focus groups was not reported to Ms. Bratcher or any USA Baseball coach or administrator so as to protect players' confidentiality. Each interview and focus group was digitally audio-recorded and later transcribed. Focus groups and interviews ranged in duration from 45 to 90 minutes. Players were divided in to focus groups based on the squad (Red or Blue) that the player was assigned to by Ms. Bratcher and the coaching staff. The coaches and Ms. Bratcher determined the rosters of the two squads. The rosters were based on a matrix of talent, experience and position(s) to ensure parity and competitiveness.

Another key portion of the study involved the participation of coaches and organizers from across the country. Preliminary conversations and research revealed that no national or regional organization was in place that governed women's baseball in the United States. Without a national organization to organize, track, and serve as a clearinghouse for information about teams, coaches and organizers I determined that a snowball technique was the best means to locate potential participants in the network of women's baseball. Coaches and organizers (20) from across the country were contacted via email and telephone and given the opportunity to participate. Sixteen individuals responded with a willingness to participate. Participation was not reported to USA Baseball, nor shared with other participants so as to protect participant confidentiality.

Several coaches and organizers from across the country attended the international friendly series versus Canada in Cary, North Carolina. Three of the five individuals at

the series who were approached and informed about the study agreed to participate in one-on-one, face-to-face interviews. Following each interview, coaches and organizers were asked to provide names and contact information of other individuals whom they deemed critical to the current women's baseball movement. Twenty organizers and coaches in all were contacted. Sixteen of the twenty elected to participate in the study. Organizers and coaches ranged in age from their mid-thirties to late sixties. Of those interviewed, ten were female and six were male. Eleven of the sixteen organizers and coaches are women. Only three of the participants classified themselves as organizers or administrators, while the other thirteen described themselves as organizers and coaches. Two of the sixteen were involved in running youth women's teams, which were focused toward the development of players who under the age of eighteen. Half of the participants interviewed reside on the eastern seaboard of the United States. Overall, the organizers and coaches are scattered across the country – Arizona, California, Idaho, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, and New York.

### **3.3 Data collection**

The majority of the data for this study was gathered through interviews and focus groups. These conversations provided opportunities to hear and understand the perspectives, perceptions and stories of women's baseball. Interviews and focus groups were loosely structured around the central research questions. Taking this approach allowed for more natural conversation, while also providing opportunities to engage the participant in the telling of their stories (see Appendix). This allowed for multiple perspectives and voices to emerge through the data collection process. A flexible

approach to interviews and focus groups achieved three objectives: 1) individual voices emerge, 2) fostering rapport through the exploration of concepts organically and 3) encouraging a focus on research questions as opposed to specific interview questions that may limit or hinder storytelling. From these semi-structured discussions emerged a set of interrelated themes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Participants were encouraged to share their “experiences” or “a time when they could remember” to elicit stories that supported their perspectives and/or attitudes. Interviews and focus groups were coded for important characters, setting, temporal phases (beginning, middle, and end), conflict(s), and resolution(s). Room was also made for other themes that did not necessarily fall into one of the narrative categories listed above. This allowed for participants to effectively tell their story in their own words.

In conjunction with the focus groups and interviews, Ashley Bratcher, Director of Operations for USA Baseball’s Women’s National Team, provided the opportunity to observe the United States and Canadian teams play and interact at a week-long International series in early August 2011. Once the schedule for the series of international ‘friendly’ games was set, Bratcher assisted in coordinating time and space for focus groups in the hotel of USA Baseball. She also helped to ensure that each group had at least four to six players.

Questions for the in-depth interviews were designed to encourage participants to discuss their narrative of baseball. The first segment of questions inquired about the structure (*doxa*) that these women come from. Participants were encouraged to talk about how they were introduced to the game of baseball. Opening with this reflective

question helped to establish a rapport with the participants through shared dialogue. Discussing how long players have played the game, about their training, key person(s) in their development and whether they recognized particular mindsets (structures) as serving a role in their development set the foundation for understanding participants' *habitus* and *field*. The questions were designed to invite respondents to answer in the form of narratives.

The second and third segments of the interview protocol delved into *agency* and the tensions between *habitus* and *field*. Theoretically, the relationships between these three concepts are complex and intertwined. These questions were designed to create a reflexive space where participants could share current stories about how tensions between subjective (*habitus*) and objective (*field*) realities are managed and what their role is in this context.

A specific line of inquiry was also developed for coaches and organizers that focused on understanding *agency* (efforts) in light of the history and social stigmas that may exist. Coaches and organizers' perspectives provided another vantage point on the story of trailblazing, while also helping understand the role of what is presumably a very important group of individuals who provide support and guidance. Organizers and coaches also provided perspectives on the activities that have helped to propel and limit the growth of the sport. This vantage point provided key insights into themes that could be used in larger analysis of the sport over time.

### **3.4 Phases of coding and analysis**

Once the focus groups and interviews were completed, each was transcribed. The transcripts were then entered into ATLAS, a data management software program. ATLAS Software was used as a tool to organize and recall the data during analysis. Researchers can use ATLAS by loading transcripts and/or other materials into a software program that the researcher then reviews. The software assists in the coding, management of codes and research notations, and the organization and recall of the researcher's work. It should be emphasized that the researcher conducts the coding and analysis – not the software. The data was coded using a narrative approach, which sought to identify the themes that help in understanding, 'what is the story of trailblazing' (Riessman, 2008). Throughout the coding process, attention was given to emerging and connected themes that helped to tell the narrative of trailblazing as opposed to identifying isolated grounded themes.

Several phases were undertaken in the analysis of the data. As previously stated, the interview protocol was drafted using elements critical to narration. In turn these questions provided participants the opportunity to share stories about their experience(s), with particular focus given to inquiry related to: perspectives on history, cultural elements of baseball, important characters, scenes, significant time periods, moments of tension or conflict, and important decisions. The themes that initially emerged spawned from an interest in identifying and capturing the story of women's baseball. During analysis of data, focus was placed identifying the aforementioned narrative elements that helped to tell the story of women's baseball. Taking this approach ultimately created

space for a variety of perspectives, voices and differences amongst participants to emerge. In the next phase of coding, the elements of the story that had been coded were grouped into clusters of themes that could help reaffirm what had been said across groups. The clusters were then compared to one another looking for duplication, tensions and similarities. Duplicated clusters were re-assessed and edited to form a new cluster. Clusters in tension with one another were paired or linked and noted as areas that would render more fruitful discussion. Finally themes that had similar characteristics by speaking to related topic(s), use of similar language in describing an experience and/or sharing perspectives from a particular timeframe provided cues on which themes had seemingly natural attraction(s) to one another. These clusters were then re-grouped into meta-themes that emerged as critical aspects to the telling of women's baseball, while also addressing the research questions that had been developed.

The interview protocol was designed toward understanding the stories and themes, while preserving the voice(s) of the participants. To accomplish this, a thematic approach was applied. This approach assisted in keeping "a story 'intact' by theorizing from the case, or each transcript, rather than from component themes (categories) across cases" (Riessman, 2008, p. 53). First, each interview and focus group was approached individually. Employing this tactic helped to order relevant episodes into a meaningful account (Riessman, 1989; Riessman, 1993; Riessman, 2008). This approach also placed a clear emphasis on the narrative that was shared and created in each conversation, as opposed to carrying over themes from one conversation. Riessman states that 'the told' are "the events and cognitions to which language refers" (2008, p.58). By not carrying

over themes, attention could be given to the conversation, allowing for nuanced codes to develop. Although some ambiguity arose, clear focus was placed on the main points of what was communicated so as to understand the participants' complete narrative(s). Employing this process of data collection helped to remove clear bifurcations of interviewer and respondent, ultimately creating a more conversational environment.

Once the data was collected, all interviews and focus groups were transcribed word for word. Next, the transcriptions were loaded as Microsoft Word documents into ATLAS coding management software. Each document represented a focus group or interview and during the first phase was coded independently of other documents loaded into ATLAS. Once each document had been independently coded, all of the themes were then reanalyzed. In this second phase, all of the codes were compared with an eye for duplication, contradictions and outliers. Duplicate themes were merged, notations on contradicting themes were taken and outliers were preserved. The results of the second phase are a more condensed and refined collection of themes across each of the focus groups and interviews. The final phase involved an analysis that focused on identifying a pattern that would help tie together a collective narrative from the themes. During this final phase, the themes were analyzed in relation to how they addressed the research questions inquiring about the issue of trailblazing identity. Ultimately, the themes were constructed into a pattern that helped to tell the story of women's baseball today from the participant perspective- one in which their voice is center stage.

Finally, it should be understood that employing a thematic approach places a clear emphasis on *what* is said (Riessman, 1993; Riessman, 2008). This encouraged the



analysis of metaphors that participants shared and layers of meaning that may be present. It should be noted however that emphasizing *what* is said does not devalue or attend to “language, form, or interaction” (Riessman, 2008, p. 59). Through the analysis of what is said in the moment, the scholar is provided the opportunity to link everyday events with theoretical perspectives to provide deeper and more nuanced understanding. Participants did not delve into details about their training or how their lives are currently structured so as to facilitate their pursuit of baseball at this level. Furthermore, no comments were made about the costs, emotional, financial and/ or physical that could be associated with reaching an elite level of performance. Analysis of interactions between and amongst the participants was not conducted outside of focus groups. Complete access to the team and their interactions was not granted. It was decided that without the complete access to the team, an interactional analysis would be superficial at best. Three phases were used to analyze data collected from observations, focus groups and interviews. In the first phase of review of the data, attention was given to themes that address the overarching story women’s baseball and whether elements of trailblazing were present.

#### **3.4.1 Phase one**

While examining the data, attention was given to the narrative themes communicated by each participant, and how those themes resonated with other participants. The stories of each participant, and the patterns across each narrative, served as a way of understanding women’s baseball and the people that shaped it. Patterns across data are recurring themes, connections, nuanced comments that change the flow of the story and moments where there are clear breaks or disruptions of the

story. Participants were approached as “active forces in the setting” of women’s baseball (Jones, 1988, p. 46). Each participant was presumed to be the best source of perspective in answering the research questions and helping to tell the story of women’s baseball in the modern age.

Systematic inductive analysis of the data took on an approach as described by Lofland and Lofland (1995), who emphasize discerning patterned themes across data collected from players, coaches and organizers. The approach utilized an “open coding” scheme (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) derived from an initial review of the data to identify preliminary thematic concepts. Identification of specified themes provided opportunities to piece together the story of women’s baseball, while generating a meta-narrative. Themes that consistently and repetitively emerged across conversations are examples of part(s) of the meta-story that contributed to an understanding that transcended individualized experiences of the participants. Piecing the themes together was similar to that of building a quilt. Throughout the process of analysis, particular themes clearly emerged, while other more subtle and nuanced themes took time to observe and understand how they connected with more dominant themes. This approach provided an opportunity to examine relationships between outlying themes and the larger narrative that began to emerge. In this first phase, the initial set of codes was numerous and several of the categories overlapped, which led to a second phase of analysis that took a step back from the individualized codes to see the larger pattern(s) that were emerging.

### **3.4.2 Phase two**

The second phase of analysis involved focused understanding on the relationships and overlap of the coding with the goal of detecting patterns. Particular attention was paid to understanding how the themes contributed to patterns as the overarching story came into better focus. Constant reinterpretation and comparison of each individual theme also took place in this phase. Codes with overlapping themes were re-examined quote by quote from the data to assess if the participants were expressing nuanced perspectives or similar concepts that could be merged. Focusing on these aspects provided the opportunity to merge, delete, and create an integrated scheme of codes to categorize data into clusters that reflected the participants' concepts more effectively. In the process, more clarified themes and patterns came into focus during this phase. Not only did more identifiable themes develop, but also various relationships among the themes could be more clearly established.

Critical to this phase was retaining the language of the participants. Remaining as close as possible to the participants' words provided the opportunity to present the narrative of women's baseball from their understanding of their experiences. Careful attention was given to not change or alter the language of participants when interpreting the data during coding. Not only did this help to preserve the meaning shared in the data analyzed, but it also elevated the amount of accuracy of the themes, patterns and subsequent theoretical analysis.

### **3.4.3 Phase three**

The third phase of analysis was to compare the participants' common or unique themes from the interviews and focus group discussions. As data was collected and analyzed, tentative theoretical links were made with the narratives and trailblazing. Theoretical 'memos' were generated during this phase and then compared to the initial research questions. What resulted were progressively higher levels of conceptual abstractions through "theoretical coding" (Glaser, 1978). This eventually produced various categories and interrelationships that described trailblazing within the context of women's baseball from a grounded theory framework, which utilized narrative analysis.

The results and analysis of in-depth interviews with coaches and organizers from across the country provided opportunities to cross reference experiences and expand our understanding of trailblazing in women's baseball. The perspectives shared in these conversations provided a vantage point that illuminated historical and social dynamics that have helped to shape women's baseball in the United States. Using a more holistic methodology, which included more voices, enabled a more dynamic analysis and depiction of women's baseball. As a result, the themes that emerge are understood from various perspectives through a process of coding and analysis that systematically develops narrative themes that address research questions about the theory of trailblazing in context.

## CHAPTER IV RESEARCH FINDINGS

Six major themes emerged from an analysis of transcripts of focus groups with players and interviews with organizers and coaches. These themes were organized in the following sections: Baseball is a way of life (disposition), The network, Structure of women's baseball (*doxa*), Breaking through (changing *doxa*), The switch, and Trailblazing. Each of the themes describes nuances and insights into the narrative of women's baseball from a collective perspective that incorporates the voices of players, coaches and organizers.

### **4.1 Baseball is a way of life (disposition)**

The disposition of baseball is built upon a framework of lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought and action. This theme was composed of ninety-three quotes that clustered into three individual codes, including 'A Shared Dream', 'I'm A Ballplayer' and 'Earning My Spot.' Together, the three individual themes provide an understanding of the perceptions of baseball that influence, shape and help to create/re-create the participants' perspectives about themselves in relation to the sport.

#### **4.1.1 A shared dream**

Female organizers who played baseball remember their own excitement as players when they discovered other women who shared similar dreams to play baseball. The shared excitement served two purposes for the organizers. First, as the organizers realized that there were other women with similar passions, the shared emotion propelled organizers to continue playing the game. Second, the excitement that ensued from

discovering that other females shared similar passions served as the catalyst for the organizers to work toward bringing other players together:

I wanted to play and didn't really know that a lot of women shared that dream but once we started the league I was amazed and blown away at how many women had that dream too. Whether it was just to get out and throw the ball around on this field, or whether it was to make it out to big tournaments for Roy Hobbs or maybe ultimately on a national team but I guess I was really amazed by the fact that so many women had baseball as something they wanted to do, wanted to go back to or try for the first time and so forth so I think it was really giving them the opportunity to play and whatever it meant to them, it was important to them to just have that opportunity. I think it's everybody realizing we have the same dream or similar ones and it's great to enable that. (East Coast Player/ Organizer)

Organizers of women's baseball emphasize that a critical part of the shared dream is having an opportunity to pursue baseball. Creating an opportunity for women to play is an often complex and difficult process due to the fragmentation of the geographic network of players and coaches. Without a centralized organization or database to track and/or communicate with players, organizers often have to rely on social media, Internet searches, and word of mouth to bring together enough players for competition. A variety of organizers and groups, each with their own unique culture and mission emerge from the loose network. Often, these personalities and mission statements of each organization are a source of conflict. A call for women players and organizers to "stick together" stems from an internal awareness of the organizational fragmentation of the sport of baseball, which organizers and coaches identified as structural deficiency. In the interviews with organizers and coaches, participants provided insights into structural network of women's baseball. The structural network of women's baseball is based upon these interpersonal relationships.

Players and organizers in women's baseball tend to float from one playing experience to another. This situation results in players and organizers being isolated and creating individualized coping mechanisms. For example, in the process, there is little sharing of successful strategies or narratives that could potentially serve as supportive examples.

I think that women that are playing baseball need to stick together, I think they have a responsibility to represent what it is that women are trying to do and trying to accomplish and it's very important for them to stick together in some ways to be supportive. (Northwest Organizer)

The idea of sticking together is taken to another level here and suggests that players and organizers owe it to one another or even have a "responsibility" to formulate solidarity. The ideas that are expressed here focus on creating solidarity and a network that aids women as they manage the challenges that they face including criticism, ridicule or even being ignored.

#### **4.1.2 "I'm a ballplayer."**

In addition to showing solidarity for women in baseball, players emphasized the importance of being perceived as ballplayers. Questions regarding the aspects of their identity that women baseball players focus on the most emerged from these conversations. The participants discussed questions about identity in terms of what they "saw" first, if they saw a woman who plays baseball or a ballplayer who is also a woman. One player shared her perspective from what she observes when she is behind the plate as the catcher:

When I look at the team, I see baseball players. I don't see girls that came from softball. Just girls that happen to play and they're out there. Our shortstop makes the play- she's a ballplayer. She dives. She looks just as good as any other

baseball player. I can say like that because people look at me with like these faces like no, but really we're like we're baseball players. That's all we are. That's what we love to do and that's how we - - we're good at it. (Participant in Focus Group #1)

This player's perspective serves as a *double entendre*. First, the catcher's position on the diamond is often recognized as the one player who sees the entire play. Her point is even more salient when this aspect is considered. When she observes her teammates, she sees players making their plays, not their gender. Her clear emphasis on the skills that are needed to perform at a certain position and the love that is shared underscore the passion that the players and organizers share for being viewed as ballplayers. It is this ideal of being labeled a ballplayer that drives many of these women to play.

However, there is a clear tension with what others see. One participant shared the view of women as one of a "few kind":

Once in a while you'll see a story, a girl will be on one of the world series team and that's about the only time that you see something like that dealing with females who are playing baseball in the league coz' then they'll say 'see, there's a girl who's playing' and it makes it seem that she's - one of the very few kinds. (Midwest Organizer #2)

From this viewpoint, we understand that women are regarded as tokens in the sport of baseball. First, the tokenism of women detracts from the emphasis on skills and abilities and instead celebrates the anomaly of gender in a given context. Second, the story of women in baseball is not reported until they reach a high level of competition (world series team). Unfortunately for the players, the everyday toil of practicing one's craft and the desire that is needed to persist is lost in the shuffle and awe of tokenism.

Even when female players achieve small indicators of success on the diamond, such as throwing velocity, their success is questioned due to their gender:



One time when I was like 12 or 13, I was in line to do a radar throw at the stadium. I'd gone earlier with my friend and I threw 65 or something. I saw my friend and said "Hey, I threw 65 earlier!" This guy turned around with his son and was like "No, you didn't." and I was like, "Yes, I did." I was like, all right, stay and watch. His son was older and bigger than me and he threw like 61 or 62. Then I threw and it was faster than his son. I was like, "See, right here." Ever since that it made me realize that everything we do, we have to like prove ourselves, which I think makes us better. It makes us more competitive. I think that we want the game more than they do because it just kind of comes easy with them. (Participant in Focus Group #6)

This story demonstrates how the success of a woman in the sport is immediately drawn into question due to her gender. The overriding presumption is that no woman could outperform a male. This story also illuminates how players can manage negativity and transform it into an internal source of energy that propels them to prove themselves as ballplayers.

Even in failure, the players' gender is drawn upon. Another player discussed how the focus on gender sets them up for failure:

Yeah, but in the position that we're all in, we're set up to fail pretty much or to crack if we get a cut or something. (Chuckle) They just expect us to act like girls when we're playing out there. Yeah, we're girls, but if you play ball, play ball. There are people who just don't believe that we can play. They look past our playing ability when they see that we're a girl. When I see that, I want to prove them wrong because it happens a lot. (Participant in Focus Group #6)

This player was acutely aware of when other people "expect" women to "act like girls". Of note, this expectation of gender is applied in success and in failure. When a player is cut from a team, the expectation was that they would not be able to endure it like a "ballplayer". Similar to the prior example, this player also used the bias as a source of fuel to prove the doubters wrong upon moving forward.

Another player explained how she transformed gender bias: “the negativity that people pose when people tell me I can’t do something. In turn it drives some kind of internal fire for me” (Participant in Focus Group #6). The “fire” needed to play was something that organizers sought in players and that players sought to foster. This “fire” would prove to be a critical factor for the next theme, in which players share how they prove themselves as ballplayers.

#### **4.1.3 Earning my spot**

Proving oneself as a ballplayer is a long and arduous process that takes time given the skill and training necessary to excel at the sport. This is further complicated by gender bias. The players and organizers recognized that a commitment and a passion that is at least as strong as the status quo is needed to persist. These biases were transformed by the participants into internal sources of motivation that powered the players and organizers in their development. The transformation of the biases is especially important in light of the resistance that women face in their pursuit to be recognized as ballplayers:

I guess it is just all adding fuel to my fire, especially growing up I’ve always had to prove people wrong. As my mom always said, I always had to outwork the guys, I always had to be the one on the field running extra or taking extra swings or whatever because the guys are automatically bigger and stronger than me. But it was going to be up to me to make my high school team, JV team, American Legion, whatever it was because nobody was going to just give it to me. And especially playing with the guys, I had to really earn my spot. (Participant in Focus Group #6)

This player’s comments also display a high locus of control that manifests itself as extra repetitions. Additional practice provides players the opportunity to reflect on areas for improvement and time to hone their skills, as well as communicates a level of commitment that transcends the tokenism of gender. A willingness to invest in additional

work presents the player as a hard working individual who is passionate about their craft. In the process, the player communicates the desire to be recognized as a ballplayer.

Another interesting component that is captured in this comment is the notion of “earn[ing] your spot.” Players at this level of competition emphasized that they had earned the right to be in this position and downplayed their gender as a deciding factor. As younger players, women play on teams where they are in the minority. In this context, the presence of young women is questioned. However, this dynamic is in stark contrast with the National Team or other women’s club teams. On these teams, the trait that once set them apart as a minority and served as a source of bias is now the common thread. The context in which the player plays and develops is significant; however, it does not change the focus of these elite players: “You have to prove that you’re not just there to be a pioneer and not there for women rights or whatever – that you’re there to be a ball player” (Participant in Focus Group #2). Whether players recognize their uniqueness in the context of where they play is a critical trailblazing theme that will be revisited. An important aspect to highlight here is that the players are aware of these tensions; however, the ideal that supersedes all other identities at an elite level is to be perceived and accepted as a ballplayer.

#### **4.2 The network**

‘The Network’ is composed of six codes that address the current structure of women’s baseball. The Network may be best understood as the immediate context from which players and organizers draw upon as a reference to guide their behavior and thoughts about women’s baseball. In all, one hundred and sixteen quotations were coded

as examples of ‘The Network’. Six dominant themes emerged to illuminate more detail about the Network. These themes were categorized into organizer and player perspectives. Organizers spoke to how players are drawn into the sport, the tensions between skill levels, and how leadership in the sport is understood to be political in nature. In contrast, players described The Network from a more personal viewpoint, which included commentary regarding the roles that family, coaches and teammates serve.

#### **4.2.1 Drawing players in**

From the organizers’ perspective, the landscape of women’s baseball is largely shaped by and dependent upon the recruitment of players. Acquiring new talent requires active and aggressive recruiting efforts wherein organizers communicate the positive attributes of their program. Recruitment efforts take place in a context that is influenced by popular culture, current events (local, national and international), and persuasion. Organizers have tapped into each of these aspects during the modern era of women’s baseball in an effort to increase the enrollment, awareness and level of competition:

The current landscape is about 20 years old, before that I believe there were some individual women’s teams out there but around that time a man named (name deleted to protect identity) started - and this was also around the same time that the movie A League of Their Own came out so it kind of brought this subject to the forefront again and there have been individual girls in the 50’s and 60’s and 70’s trying to play on teams but it kind of took off in the 1990’s in this country. And through his efforts, I think the different countries were brought together. (Midwest Organizer #3)

The current era of women’s baseball began in the 1990s. The birth of the modern movement of women’s baseball roughly coincided with the release of the movie ‘A League of Their Own’ and the formation of the Silver Bullets, a women’s semi-pro,

barnstorming baseball team sponsored by Coors Light. Simultaneously, the women's World Cup soccer team was gaining notoriety for their success on the pitch. In the process, women's sports programs gained awareness that helped legitimize the perspective that women's sports had reached a level of proficiency and popularity to sustain further investment. In this context, organizers envisioned and built a network that was nostalgic, yet modern. The leagues began with an appreciation and acknowledgement to their past ('A League of Their Own') while also foreseeing the promise of international competition. The latter presented a dynamic that has never been seen in women's baseball and has led to the formation of unique approaches and opportunities for players, coaches and organizers to transcend borders.

During this time period in women's modern baseball era, strong personalities spearheaded efforts to organize teams across the country. These efforts concentrated on providing not only the only opportunity for women to play in a region but also competitive baseball. As these teams evolved and developed their pools of talent, recruitment typically relied on individualized efforts. The funneling of recruits and talent through one coach or organizer from a region required a person who would reach out to new audiences and utilize multiple media of communication:

In the mid 90's is I went to every softball field in the Phoenix area, wherever there was coed or women's games and looked and spoke to the girls and handed them stuff and said, "You're good enough, why don't you come play?" That's how I found every single solitary player that I had in 1997 that went to the Phoenix Peppers. Unfortunately newspapers are strapped [for revenue] and they don't really run free stuff or discounted ads anymore. (Southwest Organizer/Coach)

This organizer highlighted a unique strategy, which has become widespread across the country. Organizers and coaches today have focused many of their efforts on the recruitment of talent from the sport of softball. Recruiting players with softball experience led to quick success, especially for squads competing at an elite level. USA Baseball is leading the way on this endeavor, sending coaches to softball conventions to communicate with softball coaches. One USA Baseball coach explained how attending these conferences helped increase awareness about women's baseball and query softball coaches for referrals of players that may be a good fit for USA Baseball. This type of recruitment is a new phenomenon in women's baseball that has extended ballplayer's careers. These recruiting tactics have the potential to increase tensions amongst players as it pertains to notions of authenticity, and open baseball coaches up to criticism for attempting to find short term solutions to becoming more competitive in the short term.

The utilization of various mediums of communication is also critical to The Network according to organizers:

A lot of it's through media, through word of mouth or people seeing these girls and if we hear about a girl, I've had lots of people contact me. If they're in an area that we have a coach or somebody that's on our team, we'll have them go take a look at the girl. (Northwest Organizer)

Recruitment of talent is facilitated by electronic communications such as Internet searches, social media, and email. However, these comments reveal a clear emphasis and importance on regional communication. Local media, interpersonal communication and personalized scouting are still the primary methods of recruitment and talent assessment. It is also important to recognize the relationship between recruitment and talent assessment. Assessment is dependent upon validated information that originates from a

vetted and trusted source. The provider of recruitment information is typically presumed to have accepted the mission and vision of the program. These individuals are often considered to be ‘friends of the program.’ Hence if the recruiter is not friend of the program, then the assessment holds little value and will not lead to recruitment.

#### **4.2.2 Recreation versus competition**

Female athletes are not able to easily participate in baseball compared with male athletes. As a result, there is a significant shortage of women in the available pool of applicants. This shortage is especially challenging for organizers who have attempted to develop all-women baseball opportunities. To fill rosters, many organizers found themselves managing the tensions between recreational play and competitiveness. This aspect influences the level of coaching and how these players are subsequently managed.

Some organizers developed an all-inclusive policy that means everyone plays and no one is cut. In this environment, competitiveness and elite play suffers due to inclusiveness. Women who are more developed ballplayers tend to join a local men’s team to play at a higher level. Other women organizers have combined the elite women’s talent so that they can coach at higher levels and improve competitiveness. However, this has resulted in a depletion of the best talent in some regions of the country and the local teams are left with little talent from which to build their teams. One organizer explained the tensions between recreational play and competitiveness:

Many of the people that started the Women’s League, started that so they could play baseball. When it got to a point where baseball would require a little more skill and they realized that they may not have it and they might not be playing anymore, they took it in a different direction. It was more a recreational direction. Everyone was not ‘We’re going to form a team and those that make the team will play’. Once you get by Little League and pull into high school and get

cut, they don't make the teams, it's not automatic. And I think those that started this league felt - it was a great conflict, so consequently they held back the development of the elite level of Women's Baseball. (Midwest Organizer/ Coach #4)

In this environment, the clear emphasis on simply creating an opportunity to play superseded all other concerns. Recreational opportunities have emphasized inclusion across various components – talent, age, and skill at the expense of traditional characteristics that are associated with sport such as competition. However, as this organizer notes, inclusion had disadvantages. It is important to note that, in many major sports, competency levels are associated with particular age brackets. As this organizer noted, beyond Little League (age 12/13), the policy of cutting players is enforced. Ideally a player's skill, talent and strength dictate whether the player will advance to the next level. This model has not coincided with how women's baseball has evolved. As noted, the policy of inclusion has limited the competitive and elite development of women ballplayers.

In the process, women's baseball has been challenged to showcase talent in a league format. This 'watering down' effect is a genuine concern of organizers:

I definitely agree and understand the perspective of watering it down and I certainly think that as you get to a certain level of competitiveness and at certain tournaments that you can't have a competitive level and there certainly are so many great players now that - who knows maybe at a certain point they will set a B division just like at the men's side where they have several levels of competition within an age group. (East Coast Organizer/ Player)

Without various levels of competition based on skill, regional teams are forced to compete with elite squads that showcase talent. This situation has resulted in an unofficial tiered system in which the most elite team in the country resides on the East



Coast of the United States, in close proximity to the US National team. After players reach a particular level of proficiency in women's baseball, they are poached from the team that discovered or helped to develop their talent – typically a regional team.

Other women bypass the women's baseball scene altogether to seek alternatives to the lack of competition, and “ended up joining a men's baseball league in order to still play at a competitive level. What I found was there were few women around that were interested in competition” (East Coast Player/ Organizer). This player turned organizer shed light on the tensions between a shared dream for the opportunity for women to play and competitive baseball. Men's leagues offer women an option to develop as players through intensified competition. Playing in a men's league is an option, albeit a difficult one. Players that take this route are subject to ridicule by the male league players and are limited in their options for development. In this context, women are often limited to positions that require less arm strength and fielding abilities such as second base and right field. Furthermore, these players tend to be placed at the bottom of their team's batting line-up, hence providing them fewer opportunities for at-bats in a game and over a season.

Another concern that organizers expressed is that, at higher levels of competition, there is little to no teaching of fundamentals of the game:

I don't think there's a lot of teaching of the sport going on at a higher level. I think a lot of these other teams basically just get a group of women together and they know something of the game, some of the rules, they know some of the intricacies of the game but nobody really gets with them and says 'let's teach a clinic here. (East Coast Coach)

The lack of emphasis on teaching and honing skills of the game at the higher level of all-women teams stems from the recruitment practices in place. The strategy to identify a quick solution lends itself to a mindset in which players are inserted into the system and expected to perform at a high level immediately. In the short term, the team becomes competitive; however, in the long term, it does little to build a culture of learning and development throughout all levels of women's baseball.

#### **4.2.3 Leadership as politics**

A by-product of the recruitment efforts by organizers to differentiate their programs from one another is increased competition among and between organizers. In this context, coaching perspectives and mission statements collide as organizers strive to distinguish their program from other opportunities for women to play. Coupled with the fact that the pool of players is limited, loyalties are constantly tested and players switch loyalties season-to-season, and even from one month to another. As a result, a complex organizational network of women's baseball emerges that requires an equal amount of skill between the lines, as well as political astuteness.

The fragmentation across the country is recognized by organizers as a major concern and limiting factor to the growth of women's baseball. The fragmentation of women's baseball across the country has made it difficult to coordinate tournaments, track and develop ballplayers and allow coaches and organizers to network. Without a central figure, organizers and coaches are left to develop opportunities for women to play, which are typically limited to what network and/or tournaments that the coach is tuned into. However, there is considerable debate regarding who should lead and how a

more coordinated structure should be established. Fragmentation of leadership has led to localized areas of baseball around the country. Generally, each of these areas focused on providing opportunities for women to play with women and against other women.

However, to achieve this shared goal, leadership has focused on recruiting and goals that were specific to each organization. No shared vision or national structure exists. In the process, women's baseball lacks what one organizer referred to as a united front:

We need to be a little bit more united on our front, I think there are several people who want to be responsible or given credit for the progress in women's baseball. They want to be the one who - they want to be the leader and therefore these little pockets that we speak of oftentimes butt heads or disagree or don't like each other and I think for anyone to take us seriously and to get a serious movement, we have to be far more united than we are now. (National Organizer)

This comment, from an administrator in the USA Baseball program, reflects the need for a more coordinated effort. However, these comments also suggest that the localized leaders lack the humility that is needed to conform to the rules. Interestingly, localized leaders argue that USA Baseball does not do enough:

The drawback is there is no single national governing body and USA Baseball's supposed to do that and USA Baseball says 'we don't want to until you've decided how you want things done. They could care less about promoting the sport anywhere. (Southwest Organizer/ Coach)

It can be agreed upon that both ends of the spectrum of leadership in women's baseball perceived the other side as the limiting factor in achieving unification and coordination in the sport. To the credit of the coaches and administrators at USA Baseball, they have worked toward unification through the development of a youth movement, which involved developing camps that will help to connect the National team with younger players. Instead, this development of youth camps by USA Baseball is

perceived as self-serving and in direct competition with some organizations around the country whose sole purpose is to showcase younger talent. In effect, USA Baseball is attempting to vertically integrate by creating a feeder system of talent to support their international team. However, this framework has backfired and alienated many organizers around the country, especially those organizations whose sole focus is to develop opportunities for younger women to play.

Localized organizers have proposed various strategies to progress toward unification with centralized leadership for national and regional levels. One organizer's plan proposed to leverage USA Baseball's popularity by working in tandem with local organizers to increase awareness and help draw players into the sport:

I think that the national team needs to show more leadership. USA Baseball needs to! They can easily provide more infrastructures with their financial support. Even with their logo behind it they could increase more opportunities and drive more girls that are already playing – like an awareness situation. I think USA Baseball needs to first create infrastructure, and second create awareness. I also think that the national team should be working more in their communities to train and recruit so you have girls playing on a national team. (National Organizer #2)

This system would require organizers and coaches on the local and national levels to work together to create a program in which local organizers leverage the promise and popularity of a national team to create awareness among local players. This model presumes that players will value the prospect of a national team that would in turn generate excitement to play. Of course, the difficulty with this model is that there are not enough positions on the national team. Thus, a highly competitive environment would ensue amongst players. Additionally, this collaborative model would require a level of

trust and cooperation for assessment of players and sharing of information between local and national organizers that does not currently exist.

Another model that was discussed was one that utilized a “work toward the middle” approach. This perspective requires a strategy of compromise in which local and national organizers work toward a middle ground:

For a long time we’ve looked at the top down and just really doesn’t seem to work like you need to - you can have the top start to work down but you’re going to have to start at the bottom and work towards the middle and that’s where you have them meet. (Midwest Organizer #2)

An alternative proposed structure takes a middle ground that is geared toward developing a clearer feeder system that assists in the movement of talent from localized organizations to regional organizations. This feeder system would be tiered and help to showcase the top talent from each level. The idea behind this strategy is that local players and organizers would have a clearer path and understanding of how to achieve a spot at the highest level of competition, i.e., the U.S. National Team. This model proposes a structure that assists national coaches by creating sanctioned regional teams. In theory, these mid-level teams and organizations would develop talent and gain the attention of coaches at the national level to create a more fluid system in which talent rises to the top.

Another organizer reframed the notion of ground floor efforts in relation to the age of the players and their willingness to give back to the sport:

You know you need to have a younger team as part of the organization or all they are really doing is playing for themselves, which there is nothing wrong with that, but if this [women’s baseball] is going grow, people have to start taking responsibility. We are growing things from the bottom up, but we need some more heavy lifters. (Midwest Organizer #3)

These comments highlight two more aspects of the current infrastructure of women's baseball. First, most women play baseball for a short time period and then leave the game. This organizer's comments suggest that this phenomenon is selfish in nature because these women play for themselves and do little to give back in terms of service through organization, coaching, or even sponsorship. Second, a leadership void exists in the current infrastructure in that the sport lacks "heavy lifters," that is, organizers, not coaches, who work toward creating playing opportunities for women. The distinction is that organizers function similar to event planners and general managers. In this capacity, organizers are responsible for the administrative duties that are vital to financing and providing access to playing opportunities. Organizers help to negotiate and coordinate field usage and promote teams, games, and/or tournaments. Coaches are typically focused on making on-the-field decisions regarding strategy and personnel. The end result due to the leadership void and willingness of individuals who are willing to take on these responsibilities is that there is a merging of roles. The lines between organizing and coaching are often blurred in the current structure.

Another challenge in regard to the development of leaders is the career "life cycle" of female ballplayers. Although no official tracking of participation exists, the general pattern for most women in the sport is to only play for a few years and then exit the sport altogether. One organizer described the pattern as such:

At some point people have to step up and build. I think that's where we're lacking at the moment of baseball. We need more leaders, more people willing to sacrifice to grow our future... It is kind of easy to make suggestions. The work is in doing. The life cycle of the female - of the women baseball player is to come

and play for three or four years and then they quit. And that's not progress that's just a few nice years playing baseball. (National Organizer #2)

From this perspective, the leadership void stems from an unwillingness to “step up”, as well as the attrition rate in the sport. A significant aspect to be drawn from this comment is that organizers recognize attrition of players as a challenge to leadership development. However, no reasoning to explain this phenomenon was provided. Without input from players regarding why they leave the sport, organizers presume that players leave partly to avoid taking on more responsibility. This presumption results in the perspective that players avoid “heavy lifting,” when in fact, organizers have little data or feedback upon which to base this perspective.

#### **4.2.4 Support of parents**

In contrast with the organizers' focus on leadership, recruiting and politics, players focused their discussion on their immediate support network. A player's network included parents, coaches, and teammates. Support from this network was often cited as one of the key aspects necessary to continue playing baseball. A critical and persuasive component to players experimenting and continuing with the sport is rooted in the feedback and direction they acquire from close family members, especially their parents:

If I didn't have anybody at home telling me I could do it then I don't think I would have played or stuck with it. If I didn't have a supportive household, then I don't know what I would have been doing. If I was getting negative feedback from other people, then I would just assume that they were right ... like okay, then maybe I'm not suited for this, maybe I can't do it. I definitely see that it does take big support to do it because you get in your head a lot. You go out for an outing and you doubt yourself and kind of need that extra person to tell you its okay and you can do it. It really helps, at least in my case. (Participant in Focus Group #5)

From these comments, we gain insight into the mental struggle that players endure. However, from these comments, it is not clear what contributes to the manifestation of personal doubt. It is evident that a personal, close confidante plays a critical role by encouraging the players and reminding them that, “you can do it.”

Validation from close confidants is only one form of support that players identified. Another comes in the form of braggadocio. Players discussed how it was helpful to have individuals in their network professing and defending them from those who doubt the player’s abilities:

One of the kids on my team, his grandpa was from that town and he knew the gas station where all the kids went by in the morning, so he went and sat out in front of it (Laughter) and said, “Hey, what y’all think about that girl on the mound?” (Laughter) Giving them crap. It’s awesome having such supportive people along my path. It’s great to know that they’re always standing behind me whether I’m playing ball in my town or here or even in Japan or Venezuela or wherever else baseball takes me. (Participant in Focus Group #4)

This player’s comments illuminate three important aspects that are characteristics of the players’ supportive networks: 1) the perception of having people supporting you, 2) that lack of a pull mechanism for attracting players, and 3) acknowledgment of a path. The player clearly states that support is directional, namely, from behind. This player’s description frames her as being in control, indicating that a stronger internal locus of control is helpful in navigating these contexts. Players are clearly not pulled into baseball by the status quo. Instead players face considerable resistance in baseball. Additionally, the acknowledgement of a path is significant and related to the locus of control. Players believe that they are on a path of development that coincides with the trajectory of their playing career. These aspects, as well as the significance of humor and



how it is utilized, emerged in other discussions with participants, which will be discussed further in subsequent themes.

#### **4.2.5 Support from coaches**

Player networks may start at home and be fundamental in propelling one forward in this context; however, a critical component in the network are the decision makers who decide who is allowed to play and who is not. Coaches are in a leadership role and have the responsibility of deciding who makes the team, as well as who plays when, where, and how much. Players are acutely aware that a vital part of the network is how the coach perceives their abilities and the feedback they receive from the coach:

The coaches that coached me up until high school; at first they were not really into having a girl on their team. I told them I wanted to be a pitcher and at first they kind of laughed about it, but then they saw me throw and realized I could throw. I was one of the top pitchers on the team. They always supported me. I still stay in touch with them now; they're always wondering how I'm doing. They pretty much taught me everything I know. They just encouraged me to keep going and fight through all the negatives. (Participant in Focus Group #5)

At lower levels of play, before high school, coaches openly resist the participation of females by objecting to their presence on their squad. However, if a player is provided the opportunity to play, as was the case here, the player can prove their worth. In the process, the coach realizes that the player has abilities that are fundamental to the sport, in this case, throwing. This realization might be understood as the dispelling of myths or preconceived notions, an aspect that will be explored further in subsequent themes.

As stated, players must be given the opportunity to demonstrate their potential. Without this opportunity, players are not put in a position to dispel myths, biases or

preconceived notions that individuals have or share about female ballplayers. Players described opportunity in relation to equality and how coaches treat players, especially during early stages of team building:

I wasn't treated equally; I wasn't looked at like that quality of a player. They didn't treat everybody equally. Like if you have played on a past team, you were guaranteed a spot on the team. They focused on the old players trying to make them better and didn't give the new talent a chance to step up or a chance to prove themselves. But that was like my first year with USA. Now the coaches, they'll talk to the new players, talk to the old players all the same. They don't like give you a label. You're all like one team. (Participant in Focus Group #5)

Equal treatment is the basis for opportunity in this example. Players need to have the sense that there is a chance to prove oneself in critical moments or through a "chance to step up." From a player's perspective, this opportunity is provided only when the coach allows the player to prove their value on the diamond. In other words, the player will only feel as if they are treated equally if they are perceived as potentially contributing to the team or fitting a role on the squad. Players must have the sense that roles are available to be filled. Otherwise, the exercise of trying out for a team and the demonstration of one's abilities becomes a charade. In other words, if the roles of the team are pre-determined, then new players lack the opportunity to prove their worth and/or value. This situation is referred to by the player as having "no labels." Players associate a lack of labels with an opportunity to prove their value to the coach.

#### **4.2.6 Support from teammates**

Another key component for a player's support network are the teammates that a player encounters during her playing career. Teammates spend a considerable amount of

time together on and off of the diamond. Players shared that when they think about their experience, they think of their teammates:

I feel like whenever I think of baseball, I just think back on all the things I've gone through, whether that's like good things or bad things. A lot of times I think about my teammates...you know, that guy was such a good teammate; he never had a problem with me; he always picked me up if I made a mistake or something. (Participant in Focus Group #4)

From this statement, it is clear that peers' feedback is vital, especially when it is positive reinforcement. Unlike coaches or close confidantes, teammates are discussed as lifting their spirits when they are disheartened after making a mistake. This relationship differs from how the other two constituencies (parents and coaches) are framed, which only have players' "backs" and support them from "behind". This significance of teammates will be discussed in depth in the following chapter.

Another player discussed the importance of feedback from teammates, and noted that teammates potentially silenced objections and stated that expressed encouragement helped to support her:

All the guys, if they had a problem with me, they didn't say anything or do anything about it, which was great. All the guys I played with in high school and growing up and even my high school coaches were great to me and encouraging. And if I got anything, it was always maybe a little thing from the other team, but my team was there to back me up. (Participant in Focus Group #2)

Interestingly, this player indicates a preference for silenced objections to the presence of a female on the diamond. By squelching objections, the player is better able to focus on positive encouragement. This player highlights how resistance from opponents or competitors is recognized; however, this resistance to female players is best diffused by the encouragement and communication from teammates. Notably none

of the participants provided examples or stories of women being supported by women on the diamond, especially in their youth. This may be attributed to the fact that most players experienced solitary playing experiences where they presumed themselves to be the only female playing baseball in their geographic location.

A player's network is fundamentally about the people and how they communicate with the player. Coaches and close confidantes support and defend the player. Teammates serve this purpose, as well as raise the player's spirits. The trinity of a player's network provides the player encouragement and reinforcement in the face of resistance and doubt.

#### **4.3 Structure of women's baseball (*doxa*)**

*Doxa* in women's baseball is evident as players discuss the structures and various perspectives that are in tension. Players were quick to identify resistance that they face from their community, coaches, teammates, and other teams. These perceptions or forces serve to prevent integration by attacking the player's sense of belonging. One hundred and ninety-eight quotations were coded as *doxa* into four major themes. The first theme is the pervasive opinion that 'Girls Need Not Tryout', which addresses gender restrictions for gaining entry to baseball teams. As female baseball players, the discussion turns to issues related to the 'Novelty of Gender' and 'Materialized Resistance.' Finally, there is discussion of the draw toward softball due to economic incentives.

#### 4.3.1 Girls need not tryout

The most recognized, shared perspective from players was that girls are not welcome in the sport of baseball. Players frame this perspective as a standard form of thinking that is rooted in notions of historical practice and generally accepted truths. One organizer clearly saw this perspective as a general understanding:

When you start a bat and ball sport you start baseball, and somewhere along the way it just became understood that girls play softball and boys play baseball - I still don't really know where that came from or why that has to be." (East Coast Organizer)

"Somewhere along the way," it became accepted as the status quo that girls are not to play or even tryout for baseball because they have their own version of the sport: softball. Notably, the organizer was reflexive in the moment and commented that the author of the perspective is unknown. The accepted truth that baseball is for boys and softball is for girls has folkloric qualities that will be discussed in the following chapter. The same perception of the gender assignment of softball and baseball emerges early in the process, as early as in the initial sign-up stage for youth leagues:

We registered at this little community program, which is not affiliated with any national organization at all and went to the sign up. Everything went well 'til I turned the form in and they said, "Is she your daughter? She has to play softball. Baseball is for boys, softball is for girls." (Midwest Organizer #2)

These comments resonate with the earlier themes and take it a step further by clearly stating a taboo that is not to be broken--softball is for girls and baseball is for boys. In the end, the clear rule for many parents and ballplayers is that girls are not welcome and "have to" play softball. Notably, it is not that girls *should* play softball but rather they *have* to. This taboo was reinforced at the high school level in another

community, where an organizer shared a narrative about a young girl who was “refused” the opportunity to tryout for a high school baseball team “because she was a girl and she had to play softball” (Southwest Organizer/ Coach).

The sentiment that baseball is for boys and that softball is for girls clearly distinguishes the sports as gender-specific activities. The resistance to trying out that many women faced is not isolated. The general sentiment becomes “...what we think, softball’s for girls, baseball is for boys, traditional gender roles, stereotypes” (East Coast Organizer). When women or girls step onto a diamond, it challenges a long-standing taboo that is held in our culture. No one knows where the rule originates or who authored it, the rule simply exists. This does not render the rule unchallengeable or resistant to resistance, but does make it difficult to identify an audience to focus resistance toward.

#### **4.3.2 Novelty of gender**

When the taboo of women in baseball is tested, it creates a phenomenon in which gender moves to the forefront. Players discussed how female gender is showcased by spectators and “overshadows” the play of their teammates and themselves included:

There was a tournament this summer where I came in relief and it wasn’t be best outing. I ended up going the save and after that a reporter interviewed me and he talked about how the high school coach there was impressed and everyone there was impressed. That made me angry because they’re basically impressed I even do that good because they didn’t accept me as a legitimate player. I was like that wasn’t a good outing so there’s no reason to be impressed. Sometimes it sort of overshadows whatever else is going on in the game. My starter pitched a really good game and they brought me in. They’re announcing this is the first time a girl has ever pitched in this stadium and I’m like that doesn’t matter because the game’s still going on and winning is the most important thing for us. I don’t care about that right now. (Participant in Focus Group #5)

Players recognized when their gender became the center of attention. These comments also reflect how the novelty of a female ballplayer's gender can diminish their overall perceived legitimacy as a player. In other words, the player recognizes when she is framed as a good ballplayer, for a girl. One player shared how she is used to her gender becoming the primary factor that spectators focus on, stating "I'm used to when I go out to pitch people going, 'Oh, look, it's a girl!' It's just something I'm used to, so it doesn't bother me" (Participant in Focus Group #5). Of note is how the repetition of the focus on gender renders the experience of being 'different' routine to the player, becoming "something I am used to." The affirmative position that it does not bother her is also notable and indicative of players with more experience. In fact, this particular player had considerably more playing experience and was older than her counterparts. The same player later commented on how the spirit of pioneering or trailblazing was no longer an issue to be concerned about, suggesting that these experiences may be related as these experiences are lumped together. The relationship between trailblazing and pioneering is discussed in a subsequent section as players further commented on what each of these experiences entail.

#### **4.3.3 Resistance materialized**

The resistance that players experience arises from many different angles and is something that the players constantly have to negotiate. When players discussed resistance to their presence on a team or diamond, it came primarily from four succinct viewpoints: the organization, coaches, teammates and other teams. Organizational

resistance is often institutionalized and connected with the popular perspective that women and girls should play softball:

It starts at the top you know, I mean Little League and New Jersey Little League, when Little League International told Little Leagues across the country that you have to let girls play, I think it was 1973. The state Little League Commission in New Jersey cancelled the whole season because they did not want girls to play. (Southwest Organizer/ Coach)

Female organizers and more experienced players are familiar with the policies that once prevented their presence on a diamond. Younger players have not come into contact with as much resistance and were less likely, nor willing, to suggest that organizational resistance even existed.

Although clear and deliberate organizational resistance to women playing baseball has subsided over the years, coaches still display open resistance. Players noted that resistance from coaches appeared two forms: 1) resistance by declaring there is no playing time available and 2) resistance by neglect. The first is more overt and clearly communicated to the player:

He said I could try out, but there was no way a girl would ever play on his team. I could have fought it and tried harder to get on the team, but I just kind of took the year off from playing ball. Now he always comes up to me and acts like nothing's happened, congratulates me on making the USA team, but never says anything about not giving me a chance. (Participant in Focus Group #5)

This first experience of resistance from coaches discussed here underscores three unique aspects that a player experiences in this type of scenario. The first aspect is a tension that the coach creates by declaring that a female may try-out, but that *if* the player makes the team, she will not get playing time on that team. Because the player is clearly deterred by such a declaration from the coach, players often decide to walk away



from the sport of baseball, especially when the player's options are limited. This situation is often the case for players as they mature and are limited to designated regions and/or schools for whom they can play. By deciding to not test the declaration, the player chooses to avoid the situation altogether and makes the move to another sport that serves as a substitute, i.e., softball. Finally, the coach in this scenario shows little remorse for not fostering the player's talent, even when she played for the highest level of baseball on US National squad.

Another form of resistance from coaches that emerged is via player neglect. In this context, the player may be allowed to try-out, but they are denied the opportunity for growth and development:

I remember eventually realizing that the coach let me play as long as he didn't have to deal with me. Like when we had practices together, he would never coach me. I was just kind of there, and as long as he didn't have to deal with me, he was fine with it. (Participant in Focus Group #5)

In this scenario, a player decided to try-out and made the team with the presumption that she would receive coaching and guidance to further develop her playing abilities. However, in this situation, the coach took a more covert approach of resistance to dealing with a female presence by neglecting the player altogether once they were placed on the team. From a player's perspective, this resistance is much more detrimental because the player is denied the opportunity for growth when the coach decides to ignore her. Furthermore, the player receives little opportunity for constructive criticism and insights on how to improve, which are fundamental to a player's development. When a player is not dealt with or addressed by a coach, it sends a clear

message of resistance to the player that the investment of the coach's time is not worth the effort.

Resistance to a female presence on the diamond also comes from teammates.

Players experience the resistance as early as their youth in a basic part of the game:

warming up:

I don't know how old I was, I must have been around 9 or 10, and I had to move up to the next class, whatever it was I had to get on a new team. I remember going to the very first practice and I got there and the guys starting to warm up and I needed a throwing partner. No one wanted to be my throwing partner because I was a girl. So I sort of got stuck with our worst player. (Participant in Focus Group #3)

Baseball, unlike other sports, is best done with a partner to prepare and develop fundamental skills such as throwing, catching and hitting. When a player is unable to locate a partner to play catch, the message is that the player is not welcomed. The partnering with the worst player on the team underscores the primary message of resistance where the girl in this case is put on the same plane as what is perceived as "the worst" talent of that particular squad.

Resistance from fellow teammates does not necessarily subside with age. One player noted that, when teams began to implement the practice of cutting players based on talent, a female's presence was not welcomed, especially from other players' parents:

I played on a few guys' teams that were okay with me being there, but when I made the high school team, the guy friends that I was friends with in school wouldn't talk to me during the season or anything because most of them- their parents get to them. They thought I was taking their son's spot. (Participant in Focus Group #2)

For male ballplayers, as the stakes and the prospect that they could not make a team increase so does competitiveness. In this environment, players and parents begin to

guard their own so that they may carve out a space where the player is recognized by the coach as someone who can make a valuable contribution to the team. Furthermore, as the stakes for making a team increase at the high school level, so do visions of playing at a higher level, namely college. Very rarely does a player play at an elite level without having played in high school. Hence, as this player noted, parents of male players come to the conclusion that females are taking up space and denying their son the opportunity to play in high school and possibly at the collegiate level and beyond.

In the sport of baseball, there are several methods of communicating to someone that they have done something wrong or taboo. The rules of baseball, as they are commonly referred to, are a fundamental means by which players and coaches exercise concertive control. Nuanced actions between players communicate displeasure and are recognized as a way for players and coaches to take control of a game to send a message to the opposing team. One means of communication takes form when a pitcher throws at a batter to intentionally hit them., especially in mixed gender playing situations. One player recalled how a pitcher used this means of communication to share his displeasure with her presence on the diamond and how her coach reacted:

You know, I've had teams hit me three at bats in a row. My coach came up to me and said, "If you get hit again we're charging the mound for you. (Laughter) You know it's gonna happen." (Participant in Focus Group #4)

The words of her coach confirm that a message from the other team was being sent to her. The coach acknowledges the attempts to intimidate and indicates that the team will support her by "charging the mound." By charging the mound, her team would effectively provide a response that in the game of baseball is warranted, namely, that you

support your teammates and do not tolerate abuse to your fellow player. By communicating this support to her, the coach is letting her know that her coach and teammates accept her as a ballplayer.

Resistance from other teams is not limited to actions on the diamond. Players recalled taunts from parents and opposing coaches:

I would get crap from parents and even opposing coaches all the time about being a girl. They would scream at me from the dugout. Just real offensive sexist stuff. You get used to it. You have to. (Participant in Focus Group #3)

All of the focus groups cited taunts from the parents of opposing players and coaches as obvious forms of resistance. One coping mechanism that this player underscores as a necessary trait to this form of open resistance is to be acclimated to the taunting. In other words, as female players mature in their playing careers, they should develop an expectation to be taunted, which is part of the means of managing resistance and gaining acceptance from teammates.

#### **4.3.4 Economic incentives to play softball**

A final theme that is fundamental to the framework of women's baseball in the United States is the economic incentive to play softball. College scholarships based on athletic performance provide opportunities for athletes to gain access to a higher education. This opportunity is especially important considering increasing costs for a college education in the United States. Parents and players are aware of how being awarded a college scholarship could significantly change their lives:

When parents are looking the dollar signs, I mean their little girl who's talented- is there going to be that full ride to college waiting for her for? Softball is the ticket and parents are crazy. They're thinking of that stuff I think at younger and

younger ages for girls- especially Club teams. I think that really is a factor for parents pushing their kids to softball.” (Participant in Focus Group #1)

Players become more of a commodity as the prospects of a scholarship increase. By the time a female ballplayer is in high school, discussions of being awarded a softball scholarship are commonplace, especially on for-profit Club teams whose coaches promote their track record and success in terms of the number of players that earn scholarships. The comments from this experienced player reflect how the lure of softball scholarships is now part of the Club experience:

There is a gamble, though, because for softball, we have a much greater chance of getting a scholarship paying for college. I know half our team that played softball was on scholarship. In junior college I didn’t have to pay for anything because of softball. (Participant in Focus Group #6)

Softball scholarships render the sport as a means to an end for the players and their families; namely, an opportunity for a subsidized or paid education. College baseball programs, as they are currently managed, do not consider women as plausible candidates for baseball scholarships. Hence, baseball is not a credible option for female ballplayers who are also looking for a way to play a sport that assists in their college expenditures.

Private club sports programs in the United States have erupted since the 1990s. For-profit sports models allow sports administrators and coaches to create tiered systems and programs that develop players’ talents for a monthly fee that can easily exceed hundreds of dollars a month. Membership to the club sports program theoretically provides players access to elite coaching and showcased competition, as well as the allure of gaining notoriety from scouts that will help to promote the player to college

coaches. Club softball programs, like many for-profit sports programs, incorporate the appeal that their players go on to play in college and are rewarded for their talents via scholarships. Luring talented ballplayers with monetarily-laced appeals has become valuable for business:

Softball's really big and I think that's why they try to keep it separate because softball makes a lot of money and if they have women's baseball then I think a lot of those people lose, the softball programs that is - so I think there's plenty of softball players out there that would like to play baseball if it was offered. I think it would probably hurt softball programs. (Northwest Organizer)

Another critical theme expressed in these comments is that many organizers and coaches in women's baseball are persuaded that talented players are playing softball instead of baseball. From many players' and their family's perspective, the costs of playing baseball outweigh the economic incentive of a college scholarship to play softball. This further reinforces the notion that softball is accepted as viable option for participants since they are more than willing to switch to the sport and drop their interests in baseball all together.

#### **4.4 Breaking through (changing *doxa*)**

Changing *doxa* requires a breakdown of social limits and a departure from the socially imposed need to "stay in one's place." In focus groups and interviews, changing *doxa* often took the form of players and organizers offering advice on how to 'make it' as a female baseball player. This reflexive exercise resulted in seventy-six quotations that were coded as 'Breaking Through.' In this playbook for how to succeed in baseball, experienced players indicated that new players 'Need Passion First' followed by a 'Determination to Play' to 'Build Self-Confidence.'

#### 4.4.1 Passion first

Players discussed at length how they navigated biases and forms of resistance by other individuals. A basic building block to changing perspectives began by having a ‘passion’ for the activity. Players discuss the passion as:

We’re just as passionate about this sport as those guys are, if not more, because I feel like they take all of their opportunities for granted. They have so many opportunities and it’s harder for our opportunities to come up. It’s something that we don’t take for granted. (Participant in Focus Group #4)

The players in the focus groups discussed how their passion was deeper or in more abundance. They attributed this to the fact that their own opportunities to play were limited. Female players also discussed how their passion fueled their drive to prove themselves and gain notoriety:

I think we might have a little more passion because guys just kind of accept that they play ball. Girls feel like they have to fight to get like publicity or attention. They have to fight harder to prove themselves that they can play. Participant in Focus Group #5)

From these comments, a player’s passion is framed as energy needed to “fight” resistance to the presence of female players on the diamond. The by-products of that fight are publicity or attention that in turn assist female players in proving their value as a ballplayer. Passion helps players to mitigate the resistance from others toward a female presence while also managing the expectations of which sport women *should* play. In other words, the deeper the passion, the more fuel the player has to draw upon for propelling them through open resistance.

#### **4.4.2 Determination to play**

Players noted that passion was not enough to propel a player thorough the baseball system. A second and closely related component is a determination to locate outlets to play even when there are seemingly no outlets available:

If you can't play in high school, you're not done. There are still ways you can play. You don't have to be done if someone like shuts you out. (Participant in Focus Group #5)

More experienced players strongly advocated that young players resist the notion of being prevented from playing the game. One group of players discussed how they could never accept 'no' as an answer and stated that there was always somewhere they could play. The determination of more experienced players took on a more stringent resolve:

Never take 'no' as an answer. You can always find a way to play baseball. You can always find a way to play somewhere, somehow. If you want it bad enough, you can find a way to play. One thing for me - I wish I had tried a little bit harder to play in college. I was kind of stuck on, "Well, I want to go to college here in my hometown." And looking back, I kind of wished that I would have pushed, whether I would gone a little bit farther from home or not, to play college ball. But I would just say don't ever let anybody tell you no because you can always do what you would like to. (Participant in Focus Group #6)

Players with more experience discussed having an uncompromising determination with undertones of counter aggressiveness in terms of resistance (pushing). The determination of a player flows from their passion; however, a key component is finding an outlet to play. These first two factors that players discussed focused on transforming negative feedback and roadblocks into positive components that help the player to overcome resistance to their presence and denied opportunities to play.



#### 4.4.3 Build self-confidence

A crucial part of the process for players, especially those in earlier stages of their careers, is geared toward building self-confidence. Younger players discussed the process of building confidence as based on an intrinsic trust in their skills to play:

He would tell me like, “I don’t think you can compete.” I started having to realize that I have to just play for my own love of the game. I couldn’t try and prove anything to them. Right after he said that, I got the first hit. So, just kind of trying to hold on to whatever confidence you have in yourself. (Participant in Focus Group #2)

A primary step toward building confidence is the reinforcement that particular goals on the diamond are obtainable. But, players also found that when they set goals for themselves and not other audiences, their confidence grew. This aspect allows players to reach another plateau in their confidence building once they realize that a limiting factor is their belief in themselves:

Don’t let anybody tell you, “You can’t.” If you really, if you had the drive to do something you really want to do it, do it and don’t let anybody hold you back because the only person that can hold you back is yourself. (Participant in Focus Group #2)

In the context of women’s baseball, *should* and *cannot* are often rolled into one statement. As discussed, players are consistently told that they *cannot* play baseball when, in fact, the person resisting a female presence is communicating that women *should not* play. Female players, especially those with more experience, fixated on challenging negative presumptions, namely, those rooted in challenging the mindset that women ‘cannot’ play. In the process, players are able to shift the focus of the discourse from one of confronting social norms and standards to improving their physical abilities and achievements.

Finally, players discussed the importance of playing with and around other women as a key to building their confidence:

I don't doubt myself as much I think when I'm here [playing with other women] because I have all these girls around me who have gone through so many things and the coaches. I get playing time when I was - - you know it like this it's just the atmosphere that it doesn't feel like I have to prove anything to anybody, it just feels like I'm out here playing and so I'm thankful of it. (Participant in Focus Group #2)

Some of the tensions that players experience in a male and female playing environment dissipate when women have the opportunity to play against other women. Tensions related to proving one's self worth as a female ballplayer diminished in a same-sex environment and, in the process, improved the player's self-confidence. A playing environment that features the same sex contributed to camaraderie that arises from being around other players who have similar struggles in more traditional playing environments while allowing for more opportunities to gain experience on the diamond. The combination of a newfound camaraderie plus the opportunity for growth as a player propels a player's confidence.

#### **4.5 The switch**

There is a crucial time period in which young women (age 11-15) make a decision about their careers in baseball. During this time, structure (*doxa*), dispositions (*habitus*) and the network (*field*) of women's baseball collide during a time period that is referred to as 'the switch.' This period is when female players are faced with having to decide whether they will pursue baseball or make the switch to playing softball.

Discussion of 'the switch' resulted in ninety-nine quotations that were grouped into four themes. The first two themes focused on the nature of the switch and highlight

both passive (“The switch is almost automatic”) and active (“Girls forced and Pushed”) pressures for women to switch to playing softball. These themes are followed by a dichotomous discussion of the benefits of not making the switch (“Growing with the guys”) as well as the ‘Benefits of switching to softball.’

#### **4.5.1 “Almost automatic”**

Critical to understanding the switch is gaining an appreciation for how it arises. As discussed earlier, female ballplayers grow and develop in an environment that is not nurturing and at times is hostile to their mere presence. Unlike their male counterparts, female ballplayers reach a decisive point in their ball-playing careers that is wrought with pressure, gender bias and considerations to the status quo:

A fork in the road appears and it’s almost automatic. I mean they don’t even think about. For those that do think about it, peer pressure is so great that most of them will go with softball. Family pressure might be there as well. I mean mom and dad mentioned ‘you play softball, Johnny plays baseball, girls don’t play that’ that is still around. (Midwest Organizer/ Coach)

This organizer uses the analogy of a fork to describe the moment. Players are faced with one of two options: continue to try and play baseball or switch to playing softball. However, instead of an environment in which the player feels the freedom to choose, most female ballplayers end up automatically playing softball. Pressure from family and considerations to the status quo of who *should* play baseball lead female ballplayers to the gendered alternative of baseball: softball. The pressure to choose softball is at times blunt and direct:

Some of them just played softball but they always wanted to play baseball but didn’t have an opportunity or was told, “No.” Most of the girls played until they were 12 and then got booted out and that’s the most common theme to women’s baseball careers. (East Coast Organizer)

The perspectives of this organizer describe the switch as having much less agency. These comments frame the switch as a moment that is forced upon female ballplayers. Many organizers and players recalled that they faced considerable objection and rejection around the age of twelve. This demarcation coincides with several aspects, which have been previously discussed. The most pressing issue is that around the age of thirteen, many ballplayers enter high school. The first year of high school presents a critical point for young athletes because it is often the first encounter that they may have with tryouts and the prospects of not making a team. Secondly, and more importantly, young athletes rarely progress in their respective sport to the collegiate level without having at least played that sport in high school. Making a high school squad is a critical first step to being recognized by college coaches and scouts. As a result, female ballplayers by the age of twelve and thirteen are often perceived as taking opportunity away from their male counterparts who are already in the throngs of trying to position themselves to make a high school team.

#### **4.5.2 Forced and pushed**

Female players discussed the switch in more specific terms and cited experiences with coaches and parents when being forced and pushed. None of the players discussed the switch in relation to social pressures attributed to puberty and/ or etiquette of how a woman should behave. Players described the switch as induced by peer pressure placed on their parents who, at times, would then push their daughter into playing softball. Finally, players acknowledged that the switch to softball can be temporary and often can be reversed.

As stated earlier, coaches serve a vital role in the player's network. Their guidance and support is extremely influential in terms of the knowledge and opportunities to develop their skill set. Therefore, the input that coaches provide on whether a player should play baseball or softball weighs heavily on the player. One player shared how she never considered playing another sport until she was directed otherwise:

When I was playing, I never thought I'd ever, ever switch to softball, just never on my mind. But then I asked my high school coach if I could try and he said I couldn't because it's like, girls can't try out for boys' basketball because there's girls' basketball. So since there's softball in high school that I had to play that sport. So I switched and played for four years in high school, and that took me away for a while. (Participant in Focus Group #6)

As previously discussed, social norms and expectations serve as the underpinning of popular sentiments regarding women in baseball. The coach's comments exemplify how the switch is induced by an authoritative figure. In this example, the player makes the switch; however, her journey through softball can be considered as a detour to appease the norms and pressures of the moment.

Another audience that may apply pressure to a female player is her parents. The following two quotes illustrate how the pressure builds to push the player to switch. In the first example, the player's parents received peer pressure from parents of fellow players:

Growing up like they said everyone tells you to switch over to softball. Like my parents got so much from other parents they meet, "You need to switch her over." I won't make teams because I'm a girl." But they said, "I wasn't big enough, strong enough," I didn't *have* to switch over to softball, but I did. (Participant in Focus Group #1)

The player recognizes that she did not have to switch to softball; however, following the peer pressure from other parents, she made the switch. The switch in this example is also presented as something that needs to happen. The emphasis of a need over 'should' coupled with arguments regarding the physical size of the players, the female player's parents are compelled to encourage their daughter to switch for her own safety.

Finally, the switch is framed as a pushing sensation. Considering the discussion about the passion and determination females need to play baseball in this context, it is not surprising that female players describe the switch as contrary to their will and physical in nature:

I was pushed, I played baseball but my dad pushed me to softball because that was the sport for girls. So he pushed me there and he knows he had a scholarship for college so he pushed me that hard because I can go to college after that. I necessarily can't go to college off of baseball. (Participant in Focus Group #1)

In this example, the player's father is not necessarily compelled to push his daughter to softball for reasons associated with protecting her safety or based on social norms. Rather, the father is lured by the economic incentive that his daughter has a better chance to reach and pay for college if she switches to softball.

From these experiences, we can understand the switch to be a critical moment in a player's career that occurs around the age of twelve. The switch is encouraged or even forced upon female players without regard to the player's desires or preferences. Coaches and parents are often the source of the message, encouraging the player to switch based on fears of physical safety, social norms, and/or potential economic incentives to play another sport.

### 4.5.3 “Growing with the guys”

The switch is an altogether tumultuous time period in a female player’s career. Players perceive their options at this time as choosing to fight resistance and play baseball, or to stop playing baseball and make the switch to softball with the hope of someday returning to baseball. It is understood that the tougher and more arduous option is to choose to continue playing baseball as the context of the playing environment increases in competition, and obtrusive and unobtrusive forms of resistance. For those young female players that choose to play baseball, they highlight two benefits of continuing to play. The first pertains to continuity of play, and the second relates to the development of position-specific skills. One player discussed continuity of play as:

I mean some people make that initial switch but there’s not a bigger transition back to baseball if you continue playing ball. You’re growing with the guys, you’re seeing those speeds at each level as you grow up as opposed to when you’re young and then all of a sudden having to face something 95 and try to get used to it. You’re just going to be a better player if you start young and keep going up to the ranks. (Participant in Focus Group #1)

The benefits of continuing to play in the same environment is that the player is able to “grow” with the other players and adjust to the challenges and milestones that arise. Faster pitching, harder groundballs, longer base-paths, and larger outfields are all specific examples of changes that occur for all ballplayers around the ages of thirteen and fourteen. Female players see a large benefit to growing with the competition as opposed to being removed from this environment.

Another primary and especially significant reason for remaining with baseball and avoiding the switch relates to the development of position-specific skills such as pitching. The arm motion for pitching in baseball is overhand, whereas that for pitching

in softball is underhand. In addition to the different arm motions, the ball size, range of grips for pitches, and distance from the pitching rubber to the plate also differ.

Furthermore, the motions of the lower half of the body differ considerably because there is no raised mound in softball. A younger player, who specializes in pitching, noted similar concerns:

I really don't want to make the switch. For me, they're just entirely different games, and baseball is what I love. Also, being mainly a pitcher, that'd be hard for me because I don't play other positions as much. So that's completely like different. For me, baseball is my sport now. I don't think I want to switch, ever. (Participant in Focus Group #5)

Players did not make a conscious distinction between the emotional capital and the impact on the development of baseball-specific skills. However, it is clear that both aspects arise during the critical time period termed as the switch.

#### **4.5.4 Benefits of switching**

Although a majority of the players in the focus groups identified a switch from baseball to softball as detrimental to their baseball playing careers, a few players contended that there were benefits to making the switch. Players that switched to softball discussed the benefits of feeling accepted, increased playing time that contributed to skills development, and the opportunity to grow as a person. As stated, switching to softball provided female ballplayers the opportunity to play ball in a context that was more welcoming and socially acceptable. For players that made the switch to softball, they recall a playing environment that did not continuously attempt to push them out:

The opportunities that I got through softball are huge you know; I appreciate them. So I know that if I would have stuck to baseball, I wouldn't have been able to go to school. I wouldn't have kept playing because I wanted to but people



would not have allowed me to. I'd have been forced out of getting to play.  
(Participant in Focus Group #1)

In this experience, softball is framed as providing respite and opportunity from an environment that is geared toward pushing female ballplayers out. In baseball, female ballplayers often feel unwelcomed and face individuals that are clearly trying to “force” them to quit baseball. Furthermore, softball is perceived as a mechanism that provided the opportunity to pursue a higher education. Beyond the opportunities and definitively different playing environments, players also shared how softball allowed them to grow as a person:

In softball you get all the things that you need to get those repetitions, get that playing time, grow as a person which I think a lot of girls, like these younger girls, it's harder for them to grow in an all-male environment than if they are surrounded by other females. Grow as a person and then come back to the sport if you can if that's what it is. Then later, if the opportunities to keep playing baseball come, then go play baseball. But I just think the opportunity in softball right now is where it's at for us as women. (Participant in Focus Group #1)

This player, who was older and had more playing experience, discussed how softball also provided opportunity. She framed opportunity as repetitions, playing time and personal growth. Key components in the sport are repetitions in practice to build basic skill sets and the opportunity to test those skills in competition with meaningful playing time. Players that make the switch to softball are often surprised at how their presence is welcomed by coaches. In this environment, players are able to obtain the repetitions and playing time that will help them to develop. The playing environment that the player framed as providing opportunity also allows for growth. Playing in an environment in which her skills were matched against other females her age was framed as facilitating personal growth, not just growth as a player. Finally, as this player notes, a

player can choose to return to baseball at a later point in time should the option present itself. This option was not something that younger players (mid-20s and younger) noted in their discussions about the switch.

Regardless of the choice that is made, to continue playing baseball or switch to softball, the time period is shaped by communicated expectations from coaches, parents and peers. Players are also heavily influenced by the economic incentives of potential scholarships that softball coaches use to lure female ballplayers. In the end, the switch is a tumultuous time period for female ballplayers that is recognized as having benefits and drawbacks pertaining to both emotions and development.

#### **4.6 Trailblazing**

When the subject of trailblazing was broached, the participants discussed agency and recognition within the framework of *doxa*, *field*, and *habitus*. Ninety-two quotes were coded in six major themes. Perspectives of female ballplayers as trailblazers varied considerably in these discussions. Older and more experienced participants shared that there was little self-identification as trailblazers while playing baseball. This perspective is best captured in the theme of, “I just am who I am.” Female organizers, who formerly played baseball, indicated that they now recognize trailblazing through observing others (“Difference Observed Through Others”). Organizers and players also discussed various types or waves of trailblazing, which are discussed in the final three themes: “Following the Tradition of Others,” “You Have Opened Some Doors,” and “Creating Trails of Until They Are Established.”

#### **4.6.1 “I just am who I am”**

Older and more mature players held the perspective that they were not role models. Instead, they stated that their emphasis was on who they are as ballplayers. Although this demographic expressed more awareness of the context in which they play, they did not have the issue of being a role model or trailblazer at the forefront of their mind:

I don't try and think about it too much. I don't try to be like this amazing overdone role model or something like that. I just am who I am, and if I meet somebody along the way I try to help them and let them know about the experiences. But besides that, I'm pretty relaxed about it I guess. (Participant in Focus Group #6)

Players also discussed not being a trailblazer in terms of the viewpoint that others have of female ballplayers. Namely, female players did not perceive themselves as being recognized as an “amazing overdone role model” or being “looked up to.” They took an approach of sharing their experiences with others and the comments suggest some pessimism toward the idea that female ballplayers are trailblazers; emphasizing that a relaxed approach is more appropriate.

Rather than focusing on their uniqueness as female ballplayers in the context of the sport, older and more experienced players expressed a primary concern for their development as a player. Their commitment to playing baseball and not making the switch to softball solidified their perspective of softball as a “weird” option for female ballplayers:

Day-to-day I don't really think about it like that. Baseball is what I've always loved. Some of my teammates were like, “You grew up playing baseball?” I was like, “Yeah.” They were like, “Don't you think that's weird?” (Laughter) I was like, “No, I think it's weird you grew up playing softball.” (Laughter) I feel like

I'm just me. I think it'd be cool if people looked up to me, but I don't really think that anybody that's looked up to me, or whatever. (Participant in Focus Group #5)

Similar to previous comments, this player discussed the view that others have of her as a female ballplayer in terms of being looked up to. In other words, players recognized that their gender, in the context of baseball, rendered them as role models. Simultaneously, this player does not view herself as a role model for other female ballplayers. Again, this perspective was unique to older and more experienced players who typically developed in an environment in which they were the only female ballplayer on their squad growing up.

#### **4.6.2 Difference observed through others**

Ballplayers that reached the highest level of competition understandably focused on becoming the best ballplayer that they could become. Players' "focus" is specifically geared toward the development of skills and abilities that will enhance their performance on the diamond. However, these elite players are aware of the context in which they play baseball and have taken notice:

The absolute focus is on just being a player and developing my skills. But then I also recognize that other people, especially people in the stands, see it differently and I have to deal with that. Like I remember in the state tournament for the juniors, after I'd pitched one game, a little boy came up to me and asked me to sign a ball. That made me realize that for me and my teammates I'm just another player, but that other people see me as doing something different. So I have to realize that and take into account the way they see it. (Participant in Focus Group #5)

Players, both younger and older, discussed recognizing their difference through the observations of others, namely, observers in the stands. Asking someone for his or her autograph is the recognition of someone's novel status. The reactions of observers

remind female ballplayers of their novelty, especially when their notoriety (autographs) is based upon their gender. Furthermore, the culture of acceptance that teammates of female ballplayers generate diminishes the sense of isolation that female ballplayers experience and, in turn, decreases the female ballplayer's sense of pioneering or trailblazing. These comments attest to how female ballplayers are acutely aware of how others perceive them and how it is taken into consideration with regard to their identity.

When a player's notoriety was based on their gender in an all-male playing environment, female players shared how the experience created a sense of isolation. Female players expressed how they came to the realization of "others like them" when they were presented with the opportunity to play with other females:

I thought I was the only girl in the world that played baseball in little Mobile, Alabama and I learned in my 20's when I found that other girls played. I was on the US national team and it was crazy and like 'wow' when you find out you're not the only one. (East Coast Organizer)

The realization that there are other women who play baseball is critical for the individual as they recognize and process their uniqueness. As noted, emphasis of a female player's notoriety based on their gender generates an environment of isolation. However, when given the opportunity to engage in their craft with other female ballplayers, the players discuss a transcendent experience in which they observe their difference through others similar to them.

#### **4.6.3 Following the tradition**

Younger players, those in their mid-20s and younger, perceived older players as clearing the way for younger generations of women in baseball. They discuss this aspect in terms of "following in footsteps" while not facing the same amount of resistance,

similar to the notion of drafting in racing. They also discussed older players as having established the sport for women:

The ladies who played on the Silver Bullets, faced all the resistance. We are technically following in their footsteps. We look to them as our team leaders and people who have been there because they established women's baseball. Technically they have. So *they are* the pioneers and trailblazers, and we are the ones who are appreciating it and hoping to carry on the tradition; play hard, and focus on getting better in light of all of this other stuff. (Participant in Focus Group #3)

Younger players held considerable respect for older and more experienced players, especially those who played with the Silver Bullets, an all-female professional women's baseball team that played around the country during the 1990s. A handful of the players and assistant coaches currently on the U.S. national roster played for the Silver Bullets. These individuals are revered by younger players due to their status as former Silver Bullets players. In conjunction with immediate respect for these alumnae, younger players presume former Silver Bullet players to be leaders and perceive them as creators of a tradition for younger players to uphold and follow. The tradition of women's baseball is discussed as an intense work ethic, in a highly competitive environment, in the face of resistance that is attributable to their gender. These younger players discussed the importance of focusing on the development of skills in an environment riddled with resistance and how older players provided an example for them in how to adhere to this tradition.

Younger players often discussed the model of behavior that older players set in terms of how resistance to female ballplayers was managed by older players:

There were people fighting this battle long before I came up to the scene. I don't see myself as a trailblazer because in my mind that's kind of the person who

jumpstarts it all and really keeps them moving toward the light and I did not have anything to do with that. Reaching this level of ball is what they shoot for.  
(National Organizer)

In the instances where players discussed resistance and how they managed it, a clear distinction may be drawn between players and how they perceive themselves. Players who are perceived as facing more resistance or openly discussing it are framed as trailblazers. Communicating about the resistance shifts the player into the spotlight. Although many other players may have shared a similar experience of resistance that is attributed to gender, it is the player who communicates the experience and how it was managed (battle) that is deemed to be a fighter and a trailblazer. The combination of these concepts (fighting and trailblazing) sheds light on how female ballplayers perceive the concept. To be considered a trailblazer, one has to have openly counter-resisted objections to a female presence while also sharing that experience with other female ballplayers.

Players described their journey through baseball as following in the steps of others. However, as this player noted, older players are framed as the “main” trailblazers:

They [senior players] are kind of the main trailblazers. I mean we are too, but they are the ones that people look up to and we are kind of following their footsteps I believe. We are keeping it going I guess. (Participant in Focus Group #1)

Younger players perceived older players as those establishing a tradition of women’s baseball and framed themselves as those keeping the tradition “going.” Younger players also discuss their viewpoint as looking up to older players, which

further reinforces the notion that older and more experienced players are leaders on the squad and in the field of women's baseball.

#### **4.6.4 “You have opened some doors”**

Previous themes noted how younger players perceived older and more experienced players as trailblazers who overcame hardships to establish a tradition in the sport of baseball. When the same groups of younger players were asked to explain their role in the tradition of women's baseball, they discussed their role in terms of opened doors and how they have to help keep that door open for subsequent generations:

The players before you have opened some doors. You're gonna open doors for the people coming behind you so we do play up a little bit on that pioneer mentality because it really is. (Midwest Organizer #2)

Younger players did not frame themselves as leaders or as trailblazers; however, they were willing to frame themselves as “pioneers.” Instead of blazing new trails, pioneers were discussed as paving the path that had been cleared. Paving a path for others was understood as way of facilitating future generations in their pursuit of baseball:

On one hand you want to try to encourage the girls to follow their dreams so you don't have to give up, you don't have to go do this other thing. I believe we are truly paving a way for future generations. I don't think there's anything we can do except each individual girl making it easier for the girls behind her. (East Coast Organizer)

The role of a pioneer is discussed in the context of the dreams of young girls who want to play baseball. The dream to play baseball is presumed to be a shared across all generations of female players. Younger players on the U.S. National squad specifically see their task as facilitating younger generations to play the sport. Finally, this segment



of players frame themselves as individualistic pioneers as opposed to part of a larger movement. In other words, pioneering is discussed as each individual player taking it upon herself to ease the way for many to potentially follow.

One organizer further articulated on the notion of pioneers and what it meant for younger players to pave a way on the diamond and the significance of this approach:

You are making a statement when you walk on the field and there's a responsibility to what statement you're making. To me, you make that statement with grace and with the fighting spirit. (National Organizer #2)

First, pioneering is understood as making a statement. A statement is made when a female walks onto a diamond because the playing field is presumed by many to be sacred ground for males only. However, players exercise agency on the diamond through how they communicate their presence. This organizer emphasized how players should make a responsible statement by incorporating "grace" and a "fighting spirit." The delicate balance of these aspects allows pioneers to responsibly pave a way for others while effectively changing preconceived notions of female ballplayers.

#### **4.6.5 Creating trails**

A minor segment of players described themselves as trailblazers. These players shared what it meant to be a trailblazer. Players recognized that their communication and resolve are critical to the classification of trailblazers. Players shared numerous accounts of how they corrected individuals regarding the fact that they play baseball, not softball. During one session in which players commiserated about similar experiences, a player reflected on the significance of the experience as, "I feel like every time we talk to somebody were probably trailblazers because nobody knows about us so you're kind of

opening that trail in their mind.” (Participant in Focus Group #1). A component of trailblazing then is understood as a reflexively conscious interaction where the individual seeks to alter the status quo. Opening trails in people’s minds is about communicating new possibilities in the moment.

Players who regarded themselves as trailblazers also discussed their awareness and significance of their presence in a larger context. A key component that differentiates conscious trailblazing from pioneering is the familiarity that the audience has with female ballplayers. No prior awareness of the possibility that women can play baseball renders the situation to be more akin to trailblazing. In the process, a trailblazer is more responsible for, as this player states, “opening that trail in their mind.” Put another way, the opening of a trail is the origin of the awareness of possibilities. This interaction is at the inception of change and renders the player with the trailblazing sensation.

Another key component of trailblazing was an enduring work ethic that surpassed their peers:

When you are blazing, you got to always be at a hundred ten percent and that’s something that you got to realize and not like no matter what when you step on a baseball field, whether it’s with the girls or guys. You are like a trailblazer and that people haven’t - - not that many people have done it and that you need to work your ass off to show that you can and to keep - - keep moving forward. Forge ahead.” (Participant in Focus Group #2)

In these comments, there is again a level of self-awareness that occurs in which the player recognizes their place in the context of sport and society at large. Trailblazing was also discussed as something that is synonymous with one’s presence on the field and is achieved through consistently working at a high level of physical exertion that exceeds

others. Simply performing the motions on the diamond is not sufficient for trailblazers. This level of exertion is coupled with a perspective that trailblazing is about having a momentum that is moving the player and others like them in a collective direction. The momentum to keep pushing limits, both physical and mental, places the player at the cusp of their limitations and creates a scenario in which they are able to be a leader to themselves and their teammates.

Trailblazing was further nuanced as being continuous and enduring over time. Individuals who perceived themselves as trailblazers never discussed having reached a destination or final goal. Instead, they discussed the constant struggle from an individualistic perspective:

I think you're always going to be fighting through whatever, even if it's a spot on this team or another league or a different team. You're always going to have to keep fighting and it's not something that's going to come easy to you or "I have a talent" and it's going to just come along. You have to use that and you may use that to your strengths and keep going and build on that. You're always going to be better if you work harder. It only gets tougher as you go [to] higher leagues or better competition. (Participant in Focus Group #3)

The struggle for trailblazers is framed as a fight that is about more than just the player's talent and skill. Trailblazers realized that the conflict was part of a larger struggle that transcended their play on the diamond, yet plays out in their isolated interaction in the moment. Players that identified themselves as trailblazers discussed the necessity of an enduring fighting spirit to propel their work ethic as they moved through the various levels of baseball. The higher levels of play are discussed as feeding this spirit. In other words, players in this self-identifying category are driven by the increased

pressure and competition. Throughout, the trailblazer is both individualistic, while aware of the context that affects the collective.

The themes discussed above delve into the narrative of trailblazing that is at the core of women's baseball. The six major themes, 4.1 Baseball is a way of life (Disposition), 4.2 The network, 4.3 Structure of women's baseball (*doxa*), 4.4 Breaking through (changing *doxa*), 4.5 The switch – agency exercised, and 4.6 Trailblazing, shed light on the organizational structures, agents and forces that interact in women's baseball. The following chapter will delve into a discussion about these themes and consider other findings.

## CHAPTER V CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Summary

The narrative of women in baseball is a journey that explores the various dispositions of a group of individuals as they pursue their dreams in a place where they are historically not welcomed. Players, coaches and organizers in women's baseball engage in a communicative process where they have the potential to change dispositions and norms of what is and is not considered acceptable. Employing an approach rooted in Bourdieu's reflexive sociology allows this research to expand our understanding beyond a collection of reflective narratives. This approach recognizes the participants as active agents in the construction of their reality and identities through their communication.

It is well established that baseball is historically perceived as a masculine game (Trujillo, 1991; Voigt, 1978). The Victorian age provided some women with leisure time for extracurricular activities. Women enrolled in institutions of higher education had the opportunity to pursue baseball. Therefore, baseball was limited to women of the upper class. The creation of official softball rules, coupled with social norms that questioned the strain and effects of competition on women, rendered baseball off-limits to women and opened the way for softball as women's substitute to baseball. These events were compounded by the strategic efforts of Commissioner Frick of Major League Baseball who, in an effort to limit the exhibitionist trends of minor league teams that featured women, banned women altogether from baseball. Each of these historical events help to explain the events and individuals who helped shape the story of women and baseball as

we know and understand it today. However, these events do little to provide insight into why women want to play and how they are able to pursue their careers on the diamond. In other words, by all accounts, women who play baseball are an anomaly at best, but more often perceived as a perversion in the story of baseball. These themes persist today. These perspectives leave little room for understanding how change may occur and how individuals communicatively create their identities.

Bourdieu's theoretical concepts on *doxa*, *field* and *habitus* establish an outline of practice that we use to guide our thought processes and how we communicate and understand identity. *Doxa* are the mental schemes that shape thoughts and perceptions of reality. These mental schemes stem from commonly held beliefs, which are institutionalized through a process of socialization that tells us what is, and is not acceptable. These mental schemes often go unnoticed and unmentioned because they are engrained in what is presumed to be reality. Through inquiry and discussion, the participants were provided a space to re-examine the *doxa* that is otherwise accepted as what is possible.

*Habitus* and *field* are constructs that operationalize the mental schema that aid in our interpretation of reality. These two constructs aid in our understanding of the relationships of concepts that ultimately guide the agent in the moment. *Habitus* may be understood as the history of yesterday's individual. Bourdieu's conceptualization of *habitus* is best understood as dispositions that reflect an individual's mental structures and emotions about society. These dispositions are preferences, that may be vocalized and often pertain to constructs such as gender, race and class. Individuals rely on these

dispositions in formulating their attitudes and influence how they act and react to their environment(s). The actions taken are important in our interpretation of reality because they serve as examples of what *can* be done and how one *should* do it. The concept of *field* is what we rely upon to explain the relationships of historical events with regard to what is perceived as reality. *Field* helps provide structure to our mental schema while also providing the space for conflict. In other words, field is what we rely upon to interpret past events in relation to the present, and in the process, mental schema and meaning collide to generate new meaning. From the conflict of mental schema, historical events and meaning, a new construct emerges that an individual can rely upon to interpret reality, make decisions and potentially leverage in future encounters. The new construct is a social capital that holds significant cultural and/ or symbolic meaning. Social capital is employed as a tool to interpret our surroundings and may be transferred from one context to another. Classifications such as ‘ballplayer’, ‘female ballplayer’, ‘trailblazer’, and ‘pioneer’ each have symbolic value that reflects individual and collective dispositions about women in baseball. Bourdieu’s theoretical concepts of reflexive sociology assists in developing a theoretical communicative framework that encourages a line of systematic inquiry about how agents negotiate expectations of conformity while creating change where they are historically under-represented and exist in the social margins.

The current literature on communication and sports employs a reflective approach, resulting in a review of the history of women in baseball (Gregorich, 1993; Berlage, 1994; Ross, 2002; Ardell, 2005; Ring, 2009). The nuanced history of women in

baseball is well chronicled in the literature, as well as perspectives on why baseball has traditionally been perceived as a man's game. This research has extended the literature by initiating a reflexive approach that was focused on participant perspectives of their reality. The use of a narrative method encouraged a reflexive discussion among the participants as they made sense of and shared their perspectives about women in baseball.

A review of the literature informed the development of three research questions:

1) What are the *doxa* (conceptual frameworks) that contribute to a story (product) of trailblazing?; 2) How do organizational structures/schemes communicatively influence trailblazers operating within organizations?; and 3) Do participants who are marginalized in the *field* (current structure) of baseball see themselves as trailblazers in the construction of their own narratives? Each of these questions built off of the literature and provided a platform for discussion in focus groups and interviews. The first question queried the conceptual frameworks that guide people's thinking about baseball and focused on understanding the preconceived notions that people hold regarding individuals from traditionally underrepresented groups in the context of that environment. As discussed, these preconceived notions inform the collective reality and serve as a foundation from which we interpret and understand our surroundings.

The second research question used Bourdieu's concept of *doxa* to inquire about how these processes influence people from underrepresented groups. Bourdieu's theoretical framework makes the presumption that the expectations we have of reality are tools for organizing our world around us. Organizations and structures are extensions



of these preconceived notions, while also serving as opportunities for said notions to be reinforced. Organizations and structures serve as sights of contest where shared histories and individual dispositions collide. The discussions with female ballplayers inquired about how individuals from underrepresented groups use these notions as they mitigate their environs.

The third and final research question delved into how female ballplayers, persons from a traditionally underrepresented group, made sense of their identity and how they perceive themselves. A presumption that can be made of female ballplayers is that they are aware of their status as agents of change or trailblazers. However, players could also perceive themselves as contributing to a larger historical narrative that positions them in a lineage of female ballplayers, that is less about blazing new trails as sometimes presumed. The discussions about how female ballplayers perceive themselves wrestled with these aspects of their identity and delved into issues of how they managed resistance and control in the formation of their narrative. The following section discusses the findings in relation to each of the research questions.

## **5.2 Conclusions**

### **5.2.1 *Doxa* sets stage for trailblazing**

Our collective understanding of reality and expectations of norms contribute to a communicative construction of trailblazing. These constructions in turn influence the formation of trailblazers themselves and how they navigate their interactions and contexts. The first research question delved into understanding the *doxa* and how it is operationalized. The primary thinking that guided participants about baseball was that

softball is for girls, and baseball is for boys. This way of thinking permeated both sports and set a standard for how female ballplayers are perceived, framed and discussed. Over time, the overriding norm established was that girls *have* to play softball. Strategic actions from commissioners were a reflection of these perspectives and influenced how organizations and the sport operated in regard to women. Policies about women in baseball were reinforced by the micro-level decisions of coaches, parents and other ballplayers who created an environment where females were not welcomed. Telling females that they could not try out for a baseball team, making them warm-up with the worst player on the team and throwing at batters on consecutive at-bats were all clear messages to female ballplayers that they were not welcomed in baseball.

Women in baseball have faced an inhospitable environment where women were consistently denied full access to the sport. When access has been allowed, their presence was contested, and the displeasure of their male counterparts was communicated. The rare presence of females on the diamond created an environment where female ballplayers were courted by a disposition rooted in astonishment. The increased rarity, coupled with how individuals communicated about their surprised dispositions of women in baseball, rendered female ballplayers a novelty. The showcasing of female talent on the diamond in small vignettes emphasized female ballplayers' gender in relation to their skill. In other words, female ballplayers were celebrated because they exceeded expectations of what people thought females could achieve or, in this case, what they thought women could not achieve.

The narratives from the participants about how they were treated on the diamond reinforced the notion that each of these ballplayers is a novelty. The female participants expressed genuine surprise when they met or found other females playing baseball. Their surprise was an extension of the perspective that they did not know that there were others like them that played. Finding another person like themselves, a female ballplayer, was akin to holding up a mirror for them. In the process, the participants expressed how this reminded them of the isolation that each of the participants experienced on a consistent basis. Playing in isolation became commonplace for the participants. A female player's admission of surprise when meeting other female players is a reflection of how the status quo perspective permeated the perspectives of female ballplayers. Over time, the predominant *doxa* became engrained and adopted in the collective perspective of women in baseball.

Female players have become acutely aware of the forms of resistance to their presence. In the context of women's baseball, resistance to the presence of women can be interpreted in a spectrum of obtrusive to unobtrusive. More obtrusive forms of resistance coincide with more direct forms of communication where it is made clear in no uncertain terms that women need not try out (apply). Coaches who deny players the opportunity to try out are clear examples of the more obtrusive form of resistance to women. Another more obtrusive example presented by players took place during youth baseball sign-ups. Several players recalled attempting to sign up for youth baseball leagues and being informed by league administrators that they should instead sign up for softball.

Once players gain entry to the sport, it does not necessarily mean they are accepted and that resistance to their presence will subside. Instead, the persons who resist the presence of women often choose more nuanced and intense physical means of communicating their dissatisfaction to women on the diamond. Interestingly, players did not openly discuss how they managed resistance from teammates. One plausible explanation, given players' descriptions about the important role that teammates play in propelling player's spirits to continue to play, is that teammates who openly resisted a female presence hit too close to home. In other words, players' unwillingness to talk about open resistance from teammates underscored the significance that these actors play in the story of women's baseball. Nuanced communications are not necessarily infractions of the rules of the game. Nuanced forms of resistance from ballplayers cannot be deemed as clear infractions or blatant forms of resistance. Rather, the sport provides space for ballplayers to communicate their displeasure through the game as part of the play. Examples of these nuanced communications in the context of the game include: throwing at the same batter repeatedly, sliding with cleats up to hurt a position player, or even applying a tag with more physical strength than necessary to a runner. Each of these nuanced communications is a form of resistance that female ballplayers experienced on the diamond and highlighted as shared experiences of female ballplayers. Determination as to whether any of these actions are infractions requiring discipline in the context of the game are up to umpires, coaches and teammates. Hence, if an infraction is not recognized by any of these parties, it has the potential of reinforcing the

player's communication, which may be rooted in making it clear to the female ballplayer that she is not welcomed.

None of the participants perceived that each instance of the above forms of resistance to the presence of women on the diamond was related to their gender. In this context, the social classification of gender serves as a form of cultural capital that male ballplayers may use as leverage to declassify and undervalue women who play baseball. In other words, a female ballplayer is good, but for the gender cannot be better nor achieve the highest level of achievement. The players specifically discussed how this behavior was commonplace in their playing environments, especially at the more competitive levels of play. Rather than counter-resisting, older players argued that the best response, which they advocated that younger players also adopt, is to play through. This response is a form of counter-resistance that aids players in achieving an overriding objective to earn respect through the game. In other words, playing through the initial resistance expressed toward females should not be confused as lack of a counter response. Rather, playing through communicates a persistence and determination that serves as a powerful message that has the potential to transform the *doxa*.

Many organizers in women's baseball are acutely aware of the novelty of their players and in turn their organizations. Some teams have gone so far as to refer to themselves as pioneers, an action that underscores the scrutiny that females are under within the sport. Other organizers and coaches go so far as to remind players of their unique status, which in and of itself is not groundbreaking information for players who are aware of the context in which they play. Attempts by women's teams and programs

to remind their players of their uniqueness institutionalize their novelty status. The reinforcement of the novelty status by these teams and organizations does more to serve the organization for which the player plays. The reinforcement of the novelty at the organizational level is a mechanism of control, which takes the concept of pioneering and serves the organization by attempting to increase player loyalty to the organization. By reminding players that they are one of a few, the players in turn are reminded that their options for play are extremely limited. Good players, those that fall in line with the organization, are beholden to the team, not the sport or their teammates. More research should be conducted to question how organizational standards are generated in this environment and what their influence is on the development of a player's identity.

The participants never cited who created or authored the entrenched line of thinking (*doxa*) that softball is the sport girls have to play and that baseball is for males. This mental schema became a collective way of thinking and the societal norm. However, this predominant perspective is not attributable to any one source, group, or organization. When asked, all of the participants attributed the norms and standards that spawned from this concept to 'they.' These attributions have a folkloric quality by attributing a perspective to an unknown and undefined entity. No one knows who 'they' are or where these persons may be found. Perhaps most vexing is that participants believe that 'they' are the majority. This perspective creates a significant challenge for persons attempting to alter the predominant *doxa* because they do not have an identifiable audience to craft and direct communication toward. In turn, players' resistance to the *doxa* may be minimized since they face an overwhelming,

unidentifiable and faceless majority. An unidentified audience is a daunting group to communicate with and poses significant challenges when attempting to alter the status quo.

### **5.2.2 Resistance of women, and by women**

Bourdieu's theoretical conceptualization of mental schema may become the foundation and may become embedded in the organizational structures/schemes that we generate. These schemas have the potential to communicatively influence people operating within and with those organizational structures. The second research question delved into these issues and inquired as to how these schemas influence agents in this context. Overall, structure mattered to the participants and influenced how they constructed their identity and navigated their experiences. Each of the following components discuss in more detail how structure matters in the context of women's baseball. The participants in this study fused policies, rules and norms with critical agents such as coaches, parents, teammates and organizers. These agents embody the *doxa* that enacts and reinforces the schemas that influence how female ballplayers operate. In other words, from the participants' perspectives, the person and the way of thinking are one and inseparable.

The participants' descriptions of their first forms of resistance to a female presence in baseball generally stemmed from youth baseball leagues. The resistance to a female presence in youth baseball leagues has a large influence on how participants learn about themselves and their place in the sport of baseball. Youth leagues provide an environment where players learn about the game and mature physically, mentally and

socially. In this context, female players are challenged to gain entry because their presence is resisted by various agents including; league officials, coaches, parents of other players, teammates and players from opposing teams. If female players do gain entry to the league and are placed on a team, they are then at the behest of their coach. In the player's *field*, coaches play a critical role because they determine their playing time, and their contributions (or lack thereof) directly influence the player's skill development.

The coaches who resisted female players were clearly more memorable than the coaches that encouraged and supported the players. Understanding how coaches choose to resist the presence of females sheds more light on this finding. One option that coaches in youth organizations have is to openly resist female players by communicating their displeasure with the player(s) on their team roster. In this context, female ballplayers have a clear understanding of who resists their presence, and strategies are developed to circumvent are addressed to said individual(s) by applying to play in other leagues, moving to another squad, and/or directing messages of counter resistance.

However, subtle, more nuanced messages are more common in the context of baseball and pose a greater challenge for female ballplayers. For example, female players are often matched with the weakest male player on the team. This measure creates challenges for basic drills such as playing catch. Pairing players with weaker team members puts an individual in a resource-deficient environment, making it difficult for a player to practice or build basic skills. This pairing of players that are perceived to be weak at this level also communicates to the player that little is expected of them. This nuanced communication poses a greater challenge due to the artistic subtlety of the



author. These situations technically allow for an opportunity to play. However the quality of that opportunity is laced with pitfalls, setting players up for failure and exit. Deciphering the nuances of masqueraded opportunities is something players understood through reflection, and struggled to make sense of in the moment. The tensions experienced in the masqueraded opportunities have the potential to leave players feeling frustrated and unwanted – leading to a self-imposed exit from the team by the player that diminishes the role of a coach who secretly did not want a female present.

Another more nuanced message to female players is where and when the player gets to play. Consistently placing a player at the bottom of the batting line-up or in lower-skilled positions such as right field reinforces the perspective that the player is the weakest link on the squad and does not belong. This action coupled with limited playing time and playing in situations where there is little consequence to the outcome to the game renders the playing experience as an arduous one. These tactics of resistance by coaches who do not want young female ballplayers on their squads creates an unwelcoming environment that hinders the development and skill acquisition of players. More importantly, these tactics reinforce the *doxa* that girls cannot play and become a self-fulfilling prophecy of *habitus*. In other words, placing a female in a low-pressure situation/position would provide a player with the opportunity to play freely and to achieve. When a player does not flourish at the bottom of the order or in right-field, perceptions that females could not manage low pressure situations/positions reinforce the notion that women do not belong in any part of baseball.

### 5.2.3 Organizational structures as opportunity

The narratives described above for young female ballplayers are the foundation for realizations of what is possible (*field*) for female participants and those that support them in their pursuit of baseball. The network of women's baseball is the immediate context from which players and organizers use as a reference to guide their thoughts and behavior. The network of women's baseball is the *field*, or structure, that participants rely upon as they navigate baseball as a meta-organization. The way in which participants interact and contribute to the network influences the *doxa*. If an individual does nothing and accepts the predominant thinking that females have to play softball, then the *doxa* is reinforced, and the network of women's baseball does not develop. The participants in this study highlighted how they chose to resist the *doxa* and altered the *habitus* as they advanced in the sport, as well as built a network for female ballplayers in which to participate and develop.

Ballplayers, coaches and organizers recognized their agency in the face of those that resisted their presence. Each of these groups discussed how they exercised agency as they attempted to change the status quo in baseball and build the Network of women's baseball. First, each of the parties recognized that the mere presence of a female tests the predominant *doxa*. This highlights the importance of the persistent and continuous presence of females on the diamond in order to push the boundaries of those that would otherwise resist women in baseball altogether. Players, especially those playing at an elite level such as USA Baseball are clearly focused on developing their skill set through challenging playing opportunities, which does not necessarily mean more competitive

settings. Given the lack of venues for women to play, female ballplayers first seek the opportunity to play and then assess the competitiveness of the venue. The participants, especially those with more years of experience, recognized how male counterparts took for granted the opportunity to play wherever and whenever they so chose. In the context of baseball, the male gender has the luxury of finding places to play throughout the year. Often, boys/men have the option of numerous leagues or organizations to play in at multiple levels of competition. On the other hand, women must accommodate their expectations and goals in order to play. Instead of looking for the right place to play, female ballplayers often are just looking for a chance to play. Players' perceptions of the network are influenced by their past experiences and have implications for how they interact, communicate and navigate women's baseball.

One unique by-product of this research was the insight it provided into the structure of the communication network in women's baseball. Insights into the structure were gathered based on referrals that participants provided as to whom else I should speak with, as well as whom I should avoid. The use of a snowball technique for referrals for interviews with organizers and coaches facilitated the process and provided an organic depiction of the connections across the network. Coaches' and organizers' comments provided discerning depictions of the network of women's baseball. Considering that the number of coaches and organizers in women's baseball is limited, it did not take long until the same set of names (cast of characters) began to emerge. This confirmed that a point of saturation had been reached in the interview process.

The services, teams that the coaches manage, tournaments and coordination by organizers of baseball activities embody opportunity for female ballplayers. In other words, it is the coaches and organizers that form the network, which makes the women's baseball experience very intimate and colloquial. This is in stark contrast with the complexity and size of men's baseball, as we know it today. The discussions with participants, especially organizers and coaches, shed light on the structural design of the current network.

The current network in women's baseball is porous and decentralized. It lacks a clear and definitive person who serves as the central figure to connect all segments and constituents. This network is depicted below as a Dispersed Mesh Network (Figure 5.1 below). Contacts are spread across the country, with smaller regional clusters serving as the unofficial representatives from a particular region. This network organically developed and revolves around the geographic location organizers or coaches who are dispersed across the country:

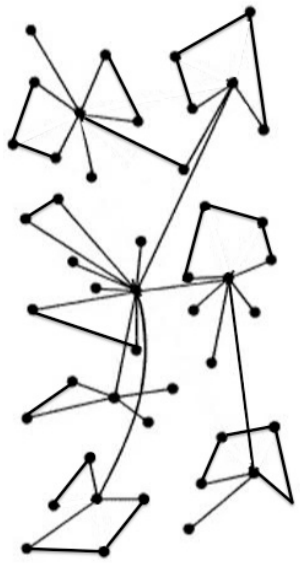


Figure 5.1: Dispersed Mesh Network. This figure represents the current network in women's baseball as porous and decentralized.

As coaches and organizers move, so does the base of operations. Often, when a coach or organizer relocates, the team disbands. Consequently, resources such as fields, funding, or players have not had anywhere near as much influence in how the network evolved. Another characteristic of this dispersed network is that there is no central point of contact linking every regional cluster. The lack of a central presence contributes to challenges in coordinating schedules, dispensing information about opportunities for the development of players and coaches, and sharing narratives and effective strategies for recruitment. The current network has a stronger localized presence where coaches mark out a region of the country and become the 'go to' resource for playing opportunities. This network contributed to a tension where coaches demonstrated a territorial mindset by preaching the importance of loyalty and what it means to be a female ballplayer

versus the player's drive to locate opportunities for play. Organizers and coaches in women's baseball use this as a tactic in recruiting and have begun to differentiate themselves by developing competing narratives of what it means to play for that team. These organizational narratives serve the organization, not the players, and set a course for conflict and tensions between individuals and organizations that may prove worth further investigation.

The coaches and organizers critiqued the current network and expressed a desire for a more centralized organizational network run by a central figure. The presumption was that centralizing efforts would steam-line efforts and provide more clarity in the selection of top talent. A similar network existed in the 1990's where one person, who happened to live in the middle of the country, served in this unofficial capacity. The person's efforts helped to connect various parties in women's baseball across the country by serving as a clearinghouse of information of who was organizing playing opportunities across the country and connecting them with players. One clear goal of this network was to elevate player talent and skill development to play on an international stage. As the clearinghouse for women's baseball, this person generated a reputation as a key person for helping to disseminate messages to key constituencies and in providing the latest information about players, teams and tournaments. The system ultimately failed when the individual diminished their role in part due to conflicts with other organizers about the direction of women's baseball. This model is best depicted as a Star Network System (Figure 5.2 below) where there is a definitive centralized agent who communicates directly with several different constituencies:

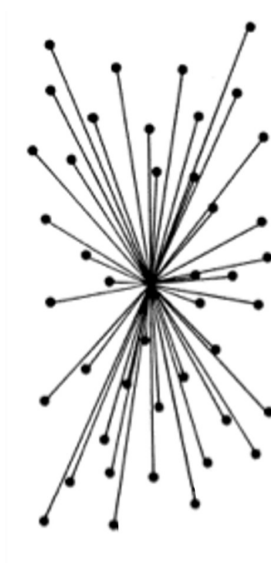


Figure 5.2: Star Network. This figure represents participants' desired network, which is a centralized network run by a centralized figure or organization.

Although this structure would theoretically provide coaches and organizers with more consistent messages, there are several limitations to this network. First, once the central figure is removed, the network fails to effectively transfer information. Such was the case when “politics” got in the way, and the person who functioned as the central clearinghouse in the 1990’s no longer chose to serve in this capacity. “Politics” is best understood as a term to cover differing opinions about organizational strategies over limited resources and about who should make decisions in this context. No person or organization officially filled this void after the individual stepped away from women’s baseball. Today, USA Baseball is making attempts to serve as an organization with regional tryouts and developmental camps. The women’s national team presents female players with a pinnacle and ultimate playing experience, which USA Baseball uses as leverage in marketing their playing experience.

Another limitation of the Star Network is that there is no communication across points of contact. Instead, all communication goes through the central point, which places considerable stress on the system by taxing the central figure point and has the potential to create a scenario where constant communication and flow of information is necessary for the network to operate. Such was the case when an individual who previously served in this capacity began to detach from women's baseball. Tournaments began to cancel each other out when they were booked at the same time period, and regional teams overlapped in their geographic territories. In the process, coaches and organizers began to lay claim to vital resources such as players and time periods for scheduling tournament experiences. Organizers were not willing to go on record about the management of this transition and would only go so far as to be quoted to attributing the shortcoming to internal conflicts about the direction of women's baseball in the U.S.

Almost all of the organizers and coaches from across the country called for a centralized model to be re-implemented. With the void left from the departure of the central organizer, many organizers and coaches argued that USA Baseball should take the central role and responsibility for coordinating efforts across all levels of women's baseball without regard to whether the organization is up for the task. However, not all constituencies were on board for a network with a clearer central figure and/or organization. Resistance to a centralized network came from smaller localized organizers and coaches whose efforts were geared toward the development of localized talent and opportunities for recreational play, not what would be characterized as a high level of competition. These smaller and more localized organizations tended to be less concerned



about developing highly competitive environments for players to develop. Further, localized teams and leagues do not position themselves as elite or as a premiere showcase of women's talent. Thus, there is a clear dialectic tension between notions of play and competition in women's baseball that must be addressed. Ignoring the tensions between play and competition has the potential to disenfranchise and alienate constituents, especially players.

Rebuilding the network of women's baseball has several challenges. First, parties disagree on the strategies to implement in building a larger network. The differing strategies call for either a ground-up approach in which regional and local teams build a foundation of players and develop skills as they see fit, or an opposing approach that comes from coaches and organizers who are tapped into international play and argue that a top-down approach is the best fit for the sport. In the top-down model, USA Baseball would provide clear directives and priorities to all of the constituencies for the development and growth of talent across the country. This model is especially intriguing to supporters as they presume that additional funding will be available from larger organizations such as Major League Baseball, Little League, and other entities looking to promote female ballplayers. One major caveat to the second approach is that it would call for all coaches and organizers to buy into the goal of developing and directing all resources toward the best national squad. Similar to the tension between play and competition, these approaches fundamentally differ as to who would make decisions about aforementioned resources. This tension is reflective of an underlying power struggle between organizers and coaches that currently limits the growth of the network

and has contributed to a divisive culture across the sport. Coaches and organizers either have a focus toward developing elite, national caliber players, or providing a social outlet for women to play with a bent for a particular social agenda.

A third, and least popular perspective of the three, calls for the two above-referenced approaches to work together toward a middle ground. This approach would require the greatest amount of collaboration and has the potential to create an environment that maximizes the resources of the current parties in the network. The biggest concern about this approach is that the loyalties of the players, coaches and organizers could be tested. Without a clear understanding of the overriding goals of the network, there is a potential for ‘politics’ to continue as usual, causing tension between local, regional and national priorities. This network would likely be the most fluid environment. For this network to operate, constituents would have to improve the quantity and quality of communication and develop a shared focus and understanding of their role and purpose in the network.

Of utmost concern regardless of which network develops and how, is the shortage of coaches and organizers willing to participate. With this aspect in mind, a critical aspect that has not been addressed is the development of leaders from the ranks of players. The organizers and coaches expressed these concerns and how the void of willing and able leaders coming up through the ranks of the current player pool was unsettling. With the organizers and coaches efforts so focused toward laying claim to regions and player development, little attention has been given to fostering leaders with necessary skills to sustain the network. Even more unsettling is that the players did not

discuss or were not aware of this issue. One potential explanation is that players do not envision their careers beyond their playing career. Another interpretation could be that players are so focused on just wanting to play and on how to gain access to the sport and acceptance as a ballplayer that there is little time to dedicate to leadership development. In other words, leadership development is a luxury that is not afforded to persons of under-represented groups in the moment because of a need to consistently focus on proving one's own self worth to others. Nonetheless, little attention to developing tomorrow's leaders in women's baseball renders the network increasingly dependent upon the coaches and organizers currently in place. As a result, when one agent leaves the network, the void has a ripple affect across the network. Ignoring the development of leaders from the players' ranks also reinforces the *doxa* and generates the notion that women cannot be considered leaders in baseball.

### **5.3 Discussion**

#### **5.3.1 Trailblazing experience- the way and social capital**

The question of whether participants who are underrepresented in the *field* (current structure) of baseball see themselves as trailblazers in the construction of their own narratives is a complex inquiry. From the participants' responses and after analyzing the data in light of theoretical concepts and prior research, there appeared to be at least three avenues for discussion when addressing this final research question: the way or tradition of trailblazing, the participant's perspective, and trailblazing as social capital. These aspects contribute to our theoretical understanding and provide clearer definition of trailblazing.

The first point to consider is that participants expressed a *way* of trailblazing without explicitly talking about the experience in reference to trailblazing or even giving it a name. In other words, the participants recognized specific strategies or responses that were effective in managing their identity but had yet to develop a shared terminology for the experience. Some of the key components of the *way* of trailblazing incorporated a clear focus on one's reputation as a ballplayer. The players' focuses were so determined on shaping and molding their reputation through careful and deliberate action. After all, if a player loses her reputation as a ballplayer, then she has little ground from which to make a claim that she belongs. This aspect was so consuming that players rarely had time to be reflective about their experiences in the moment or afterward, let alone the larger implications of their presence. Furthermore, the classification of being a ballplayer is in direct tension with serving in a leadership role in a baseball organization. From the participants' perspective, players play and leaders do something else not related to playing. Losing one's status as a ballplayer poses a greater threat than the gains to be had from being recognized as a leader in the sport.

Here is where the second aspect in regard to the *way* of trailblazing comes into play. Not until the players met or saw other women playing did many players then have the time and a space to reflect on their status and significance in the game. The players understood their difference and their place in the structure of baseball when they saw other women playing the game. In these moments, the participants saw and heard themselves through the experiences of others. These observed experiences serve as more of moments of refraction. The image of another female playing baseball, especially at a

younger age, causes pause for most, if not all participants. In this moment of pause, what it means to be a ballplayer, especially a female ballplayer is presented to a player in a medium that is not their own. Seeing another woman play is a distortion of the reality that these women have come to know through their experience wherein they embody difference. Rarely do the women playing baseball see and hear what that difference looks like. Hence, when the participants became observers and witnesses to other female ballplayers, they learned about their own difference as well. When a participant sees another woman playing, the participant's reality and truth is called into question. Prior to meeting or seeing another woman playing baseball, many of the participants expressed how they thought they were the only of their 'kind.' As a result, participants were surprised to see and meet other women playing. In the process, the participant not only rethinks their own status but also compares their own identity and experiences to the refraction as a type of member check.

Participants also recalled how they managed their reputation and the social capital of being a ballplayer. Players referred to the process of managing their status and credibility as a ballplayer as, '*the way*.' A player who is focused toward the development of an unyielding reputation as a ballplayer has *a way*. Discussions about a player's *way* delve into how and what a player communicates about her identity and the process behind building this particular social capital. In this space, the female ballplayers began to recognize their significance in the game of baseball as individuals who have the potential to generate a new way of thinking about what is possible. As the participants recognize their significance, it also has the potential to increase their social capital. In

other words, the recognition of one's status *and* one's significance multiplies the value of their symbolic meaning. The discussions about the *way* in which female players should conduct themselves serve as examples of a code of responsibility that players generate for themselves. This code holds more significance in association with being someone who is classified as being different.

### **5.3.2 Pioneering- an extension of trailblazing**

While some of the participants talked about a *way* of conduct and recognized their potential through observed difference, most of the participants were altogether reluctant to identify themselves as trailblazers. The participants who were reluctant to discuss or frame themselves as trailblazers were not necessarily avoiding the implied responsibility associated with the larger social implications of their status but instead questioned whether they were truly the first of their kind. From the participants' perspective, trailblazing was about being the first of a kind. Participants did not link their stories to the women from the Victorian Age, instead linking themselves to a more modern age of baseball that commences with the barnstorming squad of the Silver Bullets. In addition to being the first, trailblazers lay a foundation and create a particular *way* for others to follow.

Another perspective shared by players demonstrated that the players did not perceive themselves as trailblazers, rather as an extension of this initial experience. Instead of identifying themselves as a trailblazer, these players perceived their experience as pioneering. Pioneering is closely related to trailblazing and perhaps better understood as the next generation in a wave of difference. Pioneers perceived themselves

as upholding the traditions or *way* that had been established by other players that preceded them. The players that came first were referred to as trailblazers. The next generation of players talked about their role as following in a path that had been established for them by others. Furthermore, the pioneers emphasized the importance of conducting themselves in a way to ensure that similar individuals may follow in the path that was being established. A key distinction between pioneers and trailblazers is that pioneers have an appreciation for their place in a lineage of uniquely positioned individuals that have the potential to create change.

The coaches and organizers recognized the distinctions between trailblazers and pioneers. The teams were recruiting players with more playing experience who could be perceived as trailblazers by a younger generation of players. The coaches and organizers saw the value of having an assistant coach or administrator with trailblazing status. Trailblazing players hold a significant amount of respect amongst players who perceive themselves as pioneers due to the hardships and path that trailblazers established for others to follow. As a result, the trailblazing experience is becoming increasingly commodified while also serving the organization in recruiting efforts for new players. If a player embraces the notion of being a trailblazer and/or pioneer the player is able to market themselves as *being* different. This can be an asset for a team that is open to increased attention and notoriety associated with having a female presence on their squad.

Self-recognition and self-awareness in context are paramount for trailblazing. This experience is both reflective and reflexive. Players reflect on prior experiences to

make sense of what has transpired and how to improve from these interactions for future relationships. From a trailblazing perspective, decisions are made in relation to how their reputation will be influenced as a ballplayer who is establishing a *way*. The way has larger implications beyond the player and has the potential to change person's perspectives of female ballplayers. The comments from more experienced players demonstrated how they tended to become more reflexive in the moment through the recognition of patterns or themes that were consistent with prior forms of resistance to females in baseball. Fundamental to these moments of reflexivity was creating a time and space where a line of inquiry could delve into these issues. Many of the participants commented about how they had never been asked questions by someone about these issues. Instead, participants wrestled with many of the questions over time and when given the space and time to communicate their sentiments, opened up about their experiences.

A critical point of discussion that emerged from the data and analysis was whether reflective and reflexive moments and subsequent communicative acts defined female ballplayers as trailblazers. In other words, does someone have to express that they recognize themselves to be a site of struggle to be considered as someone who is creating change? A key issue is whether a person needs to communicate recognition of their potential as a trailblazer in order to act as one. All of the participants recognized that females are statistically underrepresented in the sport of baseball. As discussed, some of the participants talked about their experiences as pioneering in nature, following in the footsteps of those before them. The players who perceived themselves as pioneers



made the distinction that they were paving a way in someone's head for what was possible and that it was something they gave little thought to. In the end, it could be said that female ballplayers perceived themselves on a spectrum of trailblazing. On one end, some female ballplayers saw themselves as doing something different that has a larger social significance, whereas others gave little thought during or after to their identity or significance as a *female* ballplayer.

### **5.3.3 Theoretical definition of trailblazing**

A theoretical definition of trailblazing was developed from the feedback given by the participants and through the application of Bourdieu's theoretical principles of *doxa*, *field*, and *habitus* to the identities of the individuals from an underrepresented group. The creation of a theoretical definition of trailblazing spawned from careful consideration of the perspectives about the experiences of female ballplayers while attempting to reflect upon the larger social significance about those very experiences. Trailblazing can be understood as a communicatively-constructed identity or experience along continuum in which the individual is contested and negotiated at a particular time in history where collective norms and expectations are in tension with an individual's aspirations.

More socially conscious players recounted moments in their playing experiences and what it meant to them to be a female ballplayer. Some told stories of how they presumed to be the only one of their kind and were focused on mitigating that experience. The players' surprised reactions to meeting other females illustrated how the predominant *doxa* and *habitus* have become so engrained in our collective mindset that

those living the experience as persons from an underrepresented group adopted the predominant *doxa* that females are an anomaly in the sport. The players whom defined themselves as female ballplayers utilized the *habitus* in the construction of their identities. By defining themselves as female ballplayers, these participants recognized the significance of their status in light of the history of the game and the current status of the sport. Players that would fall into this classification did not present themselves in focus groups with the national team. This suggests that the characteristics specific to a socially conscious player do not coincide with the attributes needed and/or expected of elite level ballplayers.

Players on the other end of the spectrum were solely focused on the development of their skills as a ballplayer. These persons gave little regard to the social significance of their title as a female and instead focused on the latter, a ballplayer. The players who focused on their baseball skill acquisition and development talked about their focus and reputation in terms of being recognized and accepted as a ballplayer. In these instances, the participant was not influenced or centered on the predominant *doxa* and instead dealt more with what was in front of them at the moment- the *field*. An emphasis on the current structure of baseball and navigating the current situations at the moment facilitates players seeking to construct an identity that is solely defined in terms of what it means to be a ballplayer. Instead of focusing efforts on making sense of the historical events, perceptions that people hold about female ballplayers, and the social implication of their presence, these trailblazing players focused entirely on the moment at hand. In other words, trailblazing players never concerned themselves with being a trailblazer or

the significance of their identity, and instead on the task associated with validating their reputation in relation to their craft. A simple explanation for this could be that when the focus of a player is more centered on changing minds, attention toward the acquisition of skills is compromised too much.

Another space on the continuum of trailblazing that emerged from the participants' comments was described as being a 'pioneer' of the game. In this space, the participants embraced the distinction between what it meant to be a ballplayer and the significance of their status as a female ballplayer. The pioneers recognized their status in the history of the game as significant for two reasons. As stated earlier, pioneers follow in the tradition of trailblazers, carefully attending to the tradition that was handed down to them. Pioneers also communicated that they work to make a path for future ballplayers to follow. This third space takes into account the *doxa* and the *field*, yet has a unique take on the *habitus* of women's baseball. The pioneering identity takes ownership of a richer and more complex history of the underrepresented group (Figure 5.3 below). For this group of players, what it means to be a female ballplayer or a ballplayer is communicatively constructed through a ballplayers' experiences in light of the *doxa*, *field* and *habitus*:

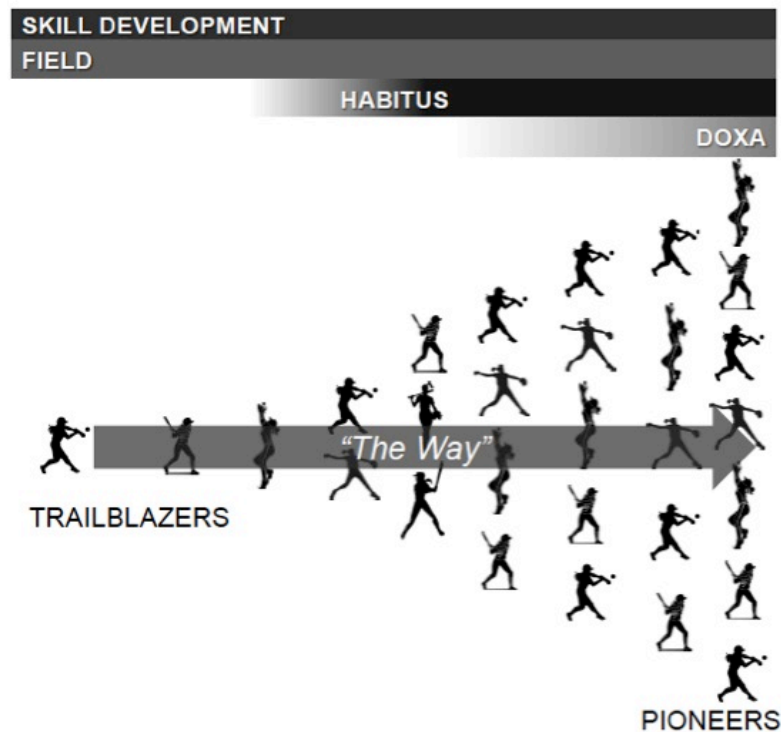


Figure 5.3: Spectrum of Trailblazing to Pioneering. Trailblazers and pioneers focus on various aspects in the pursuit of their craft. Two constants across the spectrum and waves of individuals are *the way* and focus on skill development.

The examples shared by the participants in women's baseball demonstrated how people served as sites of struggle where meaning is negotiated. In particular, the *habitus* of the status quo is tested in light of what they are presented with at the moment. Those engaged in women's baseball serve as an alternative reality that undermines the notion that baseball is for men. Each participant shared stories of how they had to correct people when they told them they played baseball, not softball. In that moment, the participant's identity is tested and negotiated in light of the predominant *doxa*. To complicate matters further, the participant's aspirations and desire to be a ballplayer

serve as a reality check to the collective norms and aspirations of the status quo. How people react to the notion of female ballplayers is more a reflection of the person's adoption and alignment with the status quo's way of thinking. If the idea of female ballplayer is received with ease, then there is space in the mental schema of the person to accept another reality. It is in those instances where the person does not know how to react to or is perplexed by the notion of female and ballplayer being put together where realities, histories, and expectations collide in the moment. In that time and space, there exists the potential for new meaning to be created. Often, as many of the participants recalled, they met resistance. This resistance is reflective of conflicting realities where new meaning is being created. For some, this new meaning is negotiated with grace and acceptance, whereas for others, the resistance becomes personal and threatening.

Finally, it is important to consider how the trailblazing experience is bounded by time and place. The context in which each of the participant's stories take place contributes to the collective perspective of what it means to be a female ballplayer. The context in which a trailblazer's identity is created is both a product of and reinforces the current structure of women's baseball. The context matters because it helps to concurrently create and limit what is communicatively created by influencing what is perceived as a feasible reality. Trailblazers and pioneers live an experience where they consistently test the presumed and accepted history and personal experience of those around them. When aspects of history and/or experience change, so does the context. As the context changes, so does the identity of the trailblazer, as well as other female ballplayers. This complex and ever shifting environment render a trailblazer's identity

fluid. Hence, although subsequent ballplayers may enter the game, they are no longer the first, which does not mean that the challenges and issues that female ballplayers face today are not similar, rather that they are slightly altered and part of a longer and richer history of women's baseball and the game. As more women play the game, the traditions set forth by the first set of women to play the game are adjusted and become part of a history that will be, in turn, questioned and tested. This research has contributed to the development of an operational definition of trailblazing and has suggested new directions for research with regard to the notion of pioneering.

#### **5.4 Pragmatic implications**

Several areas for pragmatic improvement emerged from this study. The following suggestions are specific to how women's baseball is currently managed and may prove useful to organizers and coaches currently involved in the sport of women's baseball. How players are recruited, where players seek opportunities to play, the development of leaders, the utility of a baseball summit and the design of an improved network of relationships are all practical aspects that could be tended to by participants in women's baseball today.

Individualized recruitment efforts created a funneling effect that contributed to a proprietary culture that permeates women's baseball organizations. As a result, players have become the unofficial property of certain coaches or organizers. In this context, aspects such as loyalty, commitment, and shared vision are hypersensitive issues and are intertwined with opportunities for players to play and develop as ballplayers. Players resist organizational pressures by countering with a loyalty to self rather than any given

team or organization. One example of the focus on self emerged when participants expressed their surprise in meeting other females that played baseball. To counter this development, more focus should be placed on creating a shared vision across organizations and a structure that assists all parties as they work toward a cohesive and integrated playing environment. A central organization to govern women's baseball should focus efforts on the recruitment and tracking of players, and the coordination of tournaments around the country to maximize opportunities for awareness of women's baseball.

Additional collaborative strategic efforts to develop future leaders in women's baseball need to take place. Organizers and coaches complained about a lack of willingness of players to "step up," however little effort has been put forth to engage and include players in roles of responsibility. Inviting players to share in assisting with minor administrative roles would be a positive step toward developing leadership from within. Players will feel a greater sense of ownership in the team and organizers will be able to offload duties to free them up for other organizational tasks. More important, including players in the operations of organizations will go toward improving the likelihood of retaining an individual beyond an individual's playing career, while also expanding the network of potential contributors to the sport. Developing an environment that expands the culture beyond the sense of 'being a member of a team' could contribute to players' sense of belonging, which would be accomplished by placing players in situations that help them develop skills outside the lines, away from the playing field. Furthermore, the development of leaders from the players' ranks would provide role models for younger

players and help players realize how they may pave the way for others beyond their playing careers. Organizations should consider framing leadership as opportunities to ‘give back’ or ‘pay it forward’ as practical ways to alter the *doxa*.

A key organization that has the resources (personnel, finances and access to facilities, and reputation) to make significant changes in the sport of women’s baseball is USA Baseball. It was not surprising that so many participants looked toward and called for USA Baseball to take on more responsibilities to assist in the growth and management of women’s baseball. One suggestion that should be considered is for USA Baseball to embrace this invitation by hosting organizers and coaches from across the country for baseball leadership summits. These summits could coincide with the scheduling of national tryouts and/or international tournaments. Baseball summits should not only showcase talent, but also serve as opportunities for participants and attendees to build networks and enhance their organizational, managerial, and coaching skills. Sessions featuring keynote speakers, roundtable discussions and coaching clinics could be organized around games. These sessions would expand the reach of USA Baseball while also developing the organizational network of the sport. By focusing on the improvement of players, coaches and organizers, USA Baseball would increase their stature and credibility while also facilitating communication amongst all parties. The summit could also facilitate discussions pertaining, but not limited to:

- How to increase awareness of the sport,
- Effective strategies and tactics for recruitment and retention of players,
- How to effectively manage resistance to female ballplayers,



- Coaching and organizational clinics, and
- The importance of and how to develop future leaders from within the sport.

The list is neither complete nor exhaustive. Rather, the list represents a starting point for discussion that stems from the concerns and issues that emerged from the analysis of the themes of this study. The topics of discussion at the summits would ideally be a merging of the interests and concerns from the host (USA Baseball) and the participants/attendees. One note about the summits is that careful attention should be given to not institutionalize the notion of trailblazing and/or pioneering. Doing so could have larger negative implications for the relationships between players and coaches/organizers by becoming a form of organizational control. If the organization dictates the parameters of what it means to be a trailblazer or pioneer, then individuals would have to conform to meet the preferred identity set by the organization. Control of the trailblazing and pioneering identities would allow an organization to dictate the approach to the game that player has, their focus, and how a player perceives their place in the game. Instead, all parties should focus on framing the current challenges as opportunities for change and developing and/or sharing effective strategies and tactics to address said opportunities. This approach should aid in keeping topics current and focusing on the needs of all parties.

Players should continue to seek out playing opportunities in various contexts and not limit themselves to playing strictly in traditionally all men's leagues or only on women's teams/ leagues. Playing in different environments could help players gain a

deeper understanding of the variety of ways in which the sport is played, managed and organized. A key constituent to learning about different playing opportunities is for players to network with their peers- both women and men. As noted, teammates are key to picking up a player's spirits and providing encouragement. Furthermore, for female players to break the existing *doxa* and alter the *field* of baseball, women will have to go beyond gaining entry to a team, league or organization for further advancement and ultimate acceptance across all of baseball regardless of the predominant gender of the organization.

Increased participation in women's baseball and awareness of the growth would alter the existing *doxa* by diminishing the novelty response. More coordinated efforts by organizers, general managers and tournament directors, beginning with USA Baseball, would be a significant step toward developing a more sustainable model that is more effective at developing and identifying talented players from across the country. To be clear, a strict top-down structure would not befit women's baseball. Modeling the network in such a fashion would be consistent with the theme that women throughout baseball are fighting, i.e., being told what they can and cannot do. A more effective model would generate and facilitate collaboration amongst coaches and organizers from across the country to harness local resources, established relationships and grounded knowledge of each venue. As stated, a summit would help to connect the leadership, encourage constructive dialogue and assist in recognizing the nuanced talents within the network.

An ideal and realistic organizational network for women's baseball may be a hybrid of the Dispersed Mesh and Star Networks where communication and other resources are more centralized than the current state (*field*) and more relationships are developed across various constituencies (Figure 5.4 below).

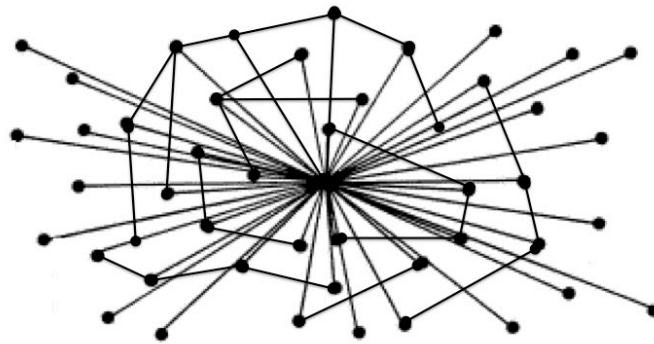


Figure 5.4: Connected Mesh Network. This figure represents a proposed hybrid network with more centralized communication and other resources with more developed relationships across constituencies.

Developing a connected mesh network has several advantages and disadvantages. Ideally, this network would facilitate the sharing of information throughout all of the constituencies. In the process, constituencies would have the opportunity to develop connections and relationships that have a central (national) focus and a localized focus. The network would also increase awareness of personnel and resources across the country and allow participants to better coordinate efforts.

However, there are also several challenges that should be taken into consideration. First, it is unclear who would facilitate in the design of and/ or designate

the network. Furthermore, it is unlikely that this network will emerge on its own organically. At this time, no person or organization has the authority or credibility to build this network. One key aspect would be to get a majority of constituents to buy into the network. Buy-in should begin with shared vision that is communicatively constructed. Participants could also address the parameters of membership, responsibilities, benefits which all go toward clarifying roles and expectations across the network. Besides the design and building of the proposed network, another concern is how the network would be maintained. Critical organizational questions would have to be addressed at an initial summit, including, but not limited to:

- Is membership in the network open to everyone, limited to by invitation only, or earned by some set criteria?
- Is there a fee for membership, and if so, what are the costs?
- What are the benefits of membership?
- Who determines who is in and who is out?
- What are the various organizational and administrative responsibilities that are needed to coordinate and maintain the network, and who serves in each of these positions?

Regularly scheduled baseball summits set to coincide with tournaments around the country could facilitate in addressing these questions. Participation in the summit would boost the launch of a new network of improved communicative relationships for women's baseball. A key aspect to improving the state of women's baseball and altering people's perspectives of what is possible is for participants to engage in meaningful and

productive discourse about what has been accomplished and what can be done to change the situation of women's baseball today. Each of the aforementioned suggestions are pragmatic recommendations that could assist in more strategic and effective organizing in the sport.

### **5.5 Study limitations**

Several limitations and questions for future research emerged from this study. These aspects are opportunities for further inquiry and advancement of the discussion presented in this study. This study demonstrated how the creation of a reflective and reflexive space assisted participants in addressing crucial questions about their identity. Inquiry that delved into sensitive issues about the participants and how they are perceived proved very challenging. A key aspect that encouraged the participants to overcome concerns about talking about themselves and their experiences was to invite the participants to envision other females sharing a similar experience. In other words, the participants opened up once they were engaged in a critical line of questioning that focused on what it meant to be a female ballplayer and whether they thought other women had similar stories. Encouraging the participants to consider these questions assisted in the development of a transcendent mindset where a shared meaning of the female ballplayers' experience could be discussed. A greater appreciation for and understanding of a collective and shared experience emerged through the sharing of stories and perspectives.

The research goal of using focus groups was to encourage the participants to share stories and perspectives about their experiences to create an environment where a

collective understanding of women's baseball could be created. Once the participants reached a level of comfort with one another, the facilitator, and the types of questions they were being asked, participants began to open up to one another rather than opening up to the facilitator. At this point, the participants began to generate a collective meaning rather than just answering questions. At this point the stories of individuals transcended to a collective and shared meaning. Building rapport among the participants was vital to getting to this point in the conversation, especially to where participants opened up and inquired with one another about their experiences.

Upon reflection, several tactical maneuvers employed during focus groups aided in achieving the overriding strategic goals to encourage participants to tell their stories. Although my experience as a coach and organizer of a women's baseball team on the West Coast provided entry into USA Baseball, I felt the need to share more information with the players about who I was and why I was at the table with them. Addressing questions related to what interests I had in women's baseball and the players' experiences provided me with the opportunity to build rapport through a shared understanding. In the process, I was able to express the purpose of the research by disclosing why I was inquiring about particular issues and how I also had a vested interest in the success of the sport. Rapport was built by placing an emphasis on enhancing trust with the participants by being open about how my experiences as a coach and an organizer parlayed with my research interests. The participants were invited to ask me questions throughout the exercise. This created an environment of discussion and exchange rather than strict inquiry. Finally, the participants were

encouraged to talk amongst themselves and inquire about the stories and perspectives they shared. This maneuver aided with identifying and contrasting underlying issues during the coding process and helped in observing group dynamics. Once participants began asking one another questions about their stories and expressed that they had similar experiences, the collective conversation shifted from individualized narratives to a collective perspective. Further analysis of the focus groups and these shifts should be conducted to examine the points at which the conversation became more transcendent and what other aspects contributed to the shift in the focus group conversation.

Limitations to this study included common methodology concerns pertaining to qualitative research. First, the data are neither generalizable of all trailblazing experiences nor statistically significant due to the small sample size and lack of an incorporated quantitative method. Secondly, constraints on the availability and willingness of participants limited the possibility of tracking players over longer periods of time due to the inherent changing nature of USA Baseball's roster. Hence, a more longitudinal approach is not viable at this time and therefore focuses our discussion on the status of women's baseball for the time period around the data collection.

Next, consideration should be given to the fact that my participation as a coach, organizer, and fan of women's baseball influenced my perspectives of the sport and the questions present in this study. My experiences and knowledge of women's baseball provided access and a level of rapport with most if not all of the participants. However, my values and assumptions as a participant require disclosure as they potentially influenced the questions asked, analysis and conclusions. Throughout the data collection

process, a challenge persisted to isolate attention on my role as a researcher and not as a fellow participant. Many of the responses, especially those from coaches and organizers, were experiences and perspectives that I had also shared as someone who had been fully engaged in running a women's baseball team. However, during the line of questioning and in the moment, my focus and attention was paid to the participants' responses, their emerging narrative and the research questions that sought to address the concept of trailblazing.

With the players, there was limited face-to-face access. For the majority of the players, the only interaction with them was during the focus group. A few of the players were aware of my efforts as a coach and organizer but had never communicated with me directly in that capacity. Conversely, all but one of the interviews with coaches and organizers took place over the phone. Due to budget and time constraints, it was not feasible to interview each of the participants face-to-face. A major difference in these conversations is that the participants from this segment had previous experience with the researcher as a coach and organizer in my role with an independent women's club based on the West Coast. My experiences as an organizer and coach served as a form of credentials and assisted in gaining access to the network of participants.

Although my experiences facilitated participants' willingness to return my initial correspondence, I had to further underscore my role as researcher and the purpose of the study, which altered the communication with the participants because I was not calling to talk about baseball; instead, I was calling to ask for their participation and perspective about their experiences in the context of baseball. Careful attention was given to avoid



commiseration or discussion of shared perspectives with the coaches and organizers. During interviews and moderation of focus groups, attention was placed solely on the participants by focusing on their words, how they expressed themselves, and the meaning they were trying to convey about their experiences. It was difficult to steer away from the desire to further connect with participants by commiserating about shared perspectives. A useful tactic to avoid these moments was to redirect focus onto the participant by asking tactical questions to redirect the conversation, such as:

- Can you think of a moment that serves as a good example of what we're talking about?
- And how did that make you feel?
- Have other people you know of in women's baseball had similar sentiments/ experiences?
- What do you do when you find yourself in this type of a situation?
- How would you address/ change the situation?

Utilizing questions such as those listed above were tactical inquiries that helped to maneuver the discussion away from commiseration while re-accentuating the purpose of the study. These questions also helped to create space for participants to reflect by queuing them for further insight and fostered an expectation for further explanation.

Most, if not all, participants were very open with their responses on how they are viewed as female ballplayers. Less than half were forthcoming about issues related to the "politics" of women's baseball. Those that opened up about the structure and "politics" expressed a desire and hope that the research would address the problems that the sport

faces today. The more guarded participants did not express their specific fears or concerns but clearly provided shorter and more direct responses. More guarded participants made distinctions between what was on and off the record and inquired as to how the data was going to be used and with whom it would be shared. Future studies on trailblazing should be conducted in various contexts with different historically under-represented groups to examine consistencies and parallels in the development of a theory of trailblazing. Further observation and analysis should be conducted on what aspects encourage participants' willingness to openly communicate about their experiences and the strategies and tactics that facilitate data collection and building rapport.

Several aspects from interview data could be further examined. A majority of the interviews took place over the phone; hence, non-verbal communication could not be observed or analyzed. Too few interviews were conducted in person to analyze whether non-verbal communication was a factor. After reviewing all of the data, it was observed that the interviews over the phone elicited shorter and more concise responses than those collected from focus groups. The responses collected from focus group discussions were considerably longer and contained more pauses. Focus group participants also displayed more emotion during their own responses and while listening to other participant's comments. Further research should be conducted to examine whether and how the data collected in each of these contexts relate with respect to willingness to disclosure and emotion.

With regard to participation and the use of snowball technique, not all USA ballplayers, coaches, and/or organizers chose to participate. Several voices and

perspectives from these sources, as well as voices of other women playing across the country are missing from the data. The data that were collected are representative of elite women's baseball in the United States, but not wholly reflective of those involved in women's baseball across the country. A more comprehensive study of women's baseball should attempt to incorporate the perspectives of players, coaches and organizers from all levels of women's baseball across the country. It should be noted that the timing of such an endeavor and the resources needed for conducting data collection would be more expensive and time-consuming than this study for several reasons. First, no central clearinghouse exists to track participation in women's baseball. This is complicated by the fact that there is no set season when women play baseball in the US, which is reflected by the fact that there is no central tournament or playoff structure for women's baseball, coaches and organizers to attend and/or participate. The lack of a centralized playing experience, akin to the Little League World Series, amateur adult baseball world series, College World Series, or Major League Baseball World Series prevents players, organizers and coaches from developing a collective focus toward a unified shared objective. The lack of a central competitive experience has led to a fractioning of interests, focus and resources. The regionalization of women's baseball is both a product of and reinforces the fractioning of the network. Regions are vying against one another to establish themselves as the "go to" organization (area) in which to play women's baseball.

Another limitation of this study relates to my position and involvement in the game. As noted, the participation in the game of baseball, specifically women's baseball,

provided me credibility and helped to build rapport. However, my experience also served as a limitation. As a male who has played and coached baseball, I embody the *doxa* that many of the participants discussed and have faced throughout their lives. My identity as a former college ballplayer and reputation as a coach and organizer in women's baseball provided me access to USA Baseball but simultaneously created a barrier with the participants. This push/ pull phenomena was a challenge to manage as a researcher. As a male ballplayer, the participants who knew me only by my credentials were cautious and measured in their responses at the onset. As a coach in women's baseball, all of the participants were cautious as they attempted to make sense of my purpose and whether there was a hidden agenda for recruiting and/ or in gaining a competitive advantage. This experience underscores the importance of employing tactics to establish trust and build rapport with participants in qualitative research.

### **5.6 Directions for future research**

Several areas emerged as potential topics for future study. As noted, there are challenges in developing the next wave of leaders in the form of coaches and/or organizers. More research should be done in contexts similar to women's baseball, with historically under-represented groups, to inquire how leaders emerge and develop in a fluid and porous communicative network. The relationship between how a *doxa* may be altered and the role(s) that leaders play in this context begs further inquiry. It is unclear from the data as to what aspects help to catapult an individual to a role of responsibility and what aspects contribute to effective leadership in this environment. How leaders

communicate and frame issues in this context is vital to understanding how a *doxa* may be altered.

Another interesting area for further research pertains to the framing of female ballplayers as ‘novel.’ All of the participants in this study presumed that more media coverage would help to increase awareness of women’s baseball and in turn alter the general public’s perspectives of women in baseball. However, increased media attention may not be the answer that many of these players seek. The coverage of Mo’Ne Davis serves as prime case study for examination of this conundrum. Davis’ accomplishments were well documented by the media and often overshadowed her team’s accomplishments or lack thereof. In other words, Davis’ accomplishments as an athlete may have done more to frame her as an outlier rather than as a ballplayer that was part of a team attempting to reach a collective goal to be recognized as the best athletes in their sport at their level. Framing a player as novelty and emphasizing the uniqueness of the novelty positions a player as an outcast that is not considered to be part of the norm, i.e., accentuating the abnormality, arguably underscores and reinforces the predominant *doxa*. The larger question to give considerable attention to is at what point and how exactly does emphasizing uniqueness transform into making someone a novelty act.

Finally, further examination of trailblazing from a longitudinal perspective is warranted. As discussed, several participants framed their identity as pioneers, i.e., extensions of the tradition of trailblazing. These same players recognized a connection to the efforts of those that preceded them by the duty of playing the game to particular standard and helping to pave the way for a younger generation of players. However,

many of today's young players do not consider themselves to be trailblazers or pioneers. Instead, the youngest players from this study perceived themselves as ballplayers who have face less resistance today because of the work done by players in the late 1990's on teams such as the Silver Bullets. These perspectives suggest a connection between trailblazing, pioneering, and the emerging ballplayers. However, more investigation should be conducted to inquire about each of these identities and how they work in a system to generate effective change with regard to *doxa*, *field* and/or *habitus*. Are these identities cohesive? If so, how do identities within a historically marginalized group connect? Could trailblazing be understood as a movement or wave of interests seeking change? Do individuals' perspectives of their role as change agents alter over time? If so, how and in what ways? Examining questions such as these and more throughout a player's career, and across different contexts, would prove extremely insightful with regard to how identity is constructed over time and the role of communication in that process. Exploring the relationships between trailblazers and pioneers is ripe for further investigation given the ever-shifting dynamics of the status quo and social norms. By further delving into these areas of inquiry, we could further expand our understanding of the role of communication in the formation and maintenance of the identity of agents of change in various contexts.

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## APPENDIX

### Interview Protocol

#### I. Recognizing Structure (*doxa*)

- Tell me how you came to play baseball. What is your story with the game?
- Do you have anything or anyone that inspires you to play? Tell me about them.

#### II. Tensions between *habitus* and *field*

- What are some of your more memorable stories about playing baseball?
- What does it mean to you to be a ballplayer/organizer/coach?

#### III. Experience of playing

- What does it mean to you to be able to play ball?
- Do you see yourself as serving a certain role in the history of women's baseball?

#### IV. Closing Questions

- Do you see what you do as unique or different? Please explain.
- What are two things you would like for me to take away from our conversation?

#### V. Supplemental Questions for Coaches

- Tell me about your organization. How is it run? What do you do well?
- How do you recruit women to play baseball? What do you look for beyond talent?
- To what extent should ballplayers be knowledgeable about the history of the game?

- Are there any challenges that you or your players face on or off the diamond?
- What are two things you would like for me to take away from our conversation?